

Deconstructing Trainers' Self-Image

How to
get the
respect
you
deserve.

By Ruth Palombo Weiss

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- Members of a stereotyped group often accept the content of the generalizations, thereby influencing their self-perception.
 - A training department should be on the same level as a company's attorneys. Both search and react to potential problems so they can fix them, make sure what's being done is being done correctly, and shore up whatever needs shoring up.
 - It's vital for in-house trainers to be able to recognize the potential impact a training product can have on their business in terms of dollars and cents.

Bookshelves are lined with self-help manuals promising ways to promote better self-esteem. An Internet search yields 713,000 hits for the word *self-esteem*. There's even a National Association of Self-Esteem.

What is this elusive quality that everyone wants? Does esteem apply just to individuals, or can groups experience high or low professional esteem?

Susan Herman, professor of management at Keene State College, identifies these characteristics of high-esteem groups:

- a feeling of pride in the group
- sufficient or more than sufficient resources
- trust in the organization and team members
- frequent interaction, common attitudes, and common values
- overarching common and important goals
- success in achieving those goals or moving in the direction of goal fulfillment
- skills for managing conflict smoothly.

Characteristics of low-esteem groups can include a sense that the group isn't empowered; lack of trust in the organization or team members; isolation; lack of common, meaningful goals; incessant and diffuse blaming of others and self; criticism of others and self; and a feeling of hopelessness.

"Another characteristic of low self-esteem groups and low-status members in those groups is a tendency to kick the dog. Feeling picked on and powerless, [such people] lord whatever shreds of power they might have over others," says Herman.

"Ever since journalist Walter Lippmann coined the word *stereotyping*, people have recognized that the groups they belong to determine [people's] judgment," says Donelson Forsyth, professor

of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University. He notes that engineers are often viewed as humorless and detail oriented. Similarly, marketing professionals are said to care more about look than substance, and HR people are thought to be touchy-feely. Such stereotypes may hold a kernel of truth, but they're usually unfair exaggerations.

"The problem is that the members of a stereotyped group often accept the content of the generalizations, thereby influencing their self-perception. Engineers become nit-picky and HR people become soft because that's how they're characterized. The prophecy 'You have low value' becomes self-fulfilling when stereotyped groups internalize the content," says Forsyth.

Many psychologists theorize that one's self has a large interpersonal component. So although we tend to think self-esteem is based on our appraisal of our personal qualities, it's also shaped by our appraisal of the qualities of the groups we belong to. If we belong to a bunch of "loser" groups, then our personal self-esteem is likely to be low. Most people can protect their sense of self-esteem by cutting off their connection to groups with negative social identities. However, that might not be possible for people in a professional group; most people belong to such a group to earn their livelihood.

A low-status group within a larger group or organization may conclude that the other group members don't appreciate their perspective. They may also feel that they're unfairly denied input in decisions and are inadequately compensated relative to members of other groups.

What about trainers?

Who are trainers (in-house or consultants) and does their background influence their group esteem? Traditionally, many trainers came from academia and so have the mindset of educators.

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aren't always seen as central to running a business, but they also recognize that without what they bring to the table, businesses wouldn't run as well," says Carol Price, owner of Professionally Speaking. Price sees trainers as the "invisible heroes" in a company, busy building their training skills when not engaged in actual training. "Educators have accepted the fact that education in the United States can be and often is invisible," she says.

A training department could and should be on the same level as a company's attorneys, according to Price. Both search and react to potential problems so they can fix them, make sure what's being done is being done correctly, and shore up whatever needs shoring up. "The only difference," says Price, "is that trainers haven't been given the same esteem as attorneys have, yet a trainer is going to affect a lot more people."

There seems to be a difference in the self-esteem of trainers who are consultants and those who work in-house. Because external consultants are hired on contract to do a specific job, they ostensibly agree with the organization that hires them. When the results are achieved, the client is satisfied and the contract trainer gets a lot of strokes. But, depending on the organization, in-house trainers can be either respected or considered a necessary evil. Part of the ambivalence to in-house trainers may be that they're often located in the HR department, which must often navigate choppy waters in this age of litigation.

In-house trainers often need to convince the people in charge that training is elemental to human performance and financial results. "Training isn't an end in itself," says Ruth Salinger, an internal performance consultant at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "It's there to support performance and help accomplish the organization's business whatever that is."

Jobs such as IRS auditor and air traffic controller are classic examples in which training is essential to support performance. That kind of training is easy

for an HR department or consulting trainer to sell, less so regarding training for supervisory jobs. Such roles tend to use so-called soft skills such as team-building, communication, and creativity.

In addition, businesses don't always factor in training when looking at profit-and-loss statements. Yet, most trainers agree that a business is only as good as its people are, and that depends on training.

"Because businesses operate under the auspices of profit, training has to display that there's a return on the dollar, which isn't always easy to exhibit," says Susan Langlitz, owner of SL Associates. "In that vein, I think there's truth to the premise that training isn't always held in high regard. Dollar for dollar, it isn't always as clear as selling a product."

Langlitz thinks there needs to be accountability on both sides. Trainers need to show how an investment in training produces quantifiable, positive returns measured in such areas as error rate, customer satisfaction, absentee level, and employee turnover. It's up to a trainer when presenting a case for training to point out that inherent in the proposal is evidence that the training will either make or save money for the organization.

Some internal trainers complain that suppliers often try to go around them because they think the trainers don't have buying authority and are clueless about the company strategy. Dennis Tester of On Line Learning Systems encountered this problem when his salespeople said they couldn't get a training manager to make a decision about a product they were offering. Tester's salespeople, who were trying to sell Tester's training services, often found that the training manager would string them along for months or even years. Eventually, Tester's sales manager found out who was the training manager's boss, who saw the value of the product and signed the contract, circumventing the training manager.

Tester says that being decisive, based on knowledge of the business, is the only way to do business. It's vital for in-house trainers to recognize the poten-

stereotyping, people have recognized that the groups they stereotypes are usually unfair exaggerations.

Shortcut to Self-Esteem

- Understand your audience.
- Create a clear definition of what you deliver.
- Make sure the delivery meets the promise.
- Make sure that communication is open and equal, and ensure that what you've done is acknowledged.

tial impact a training product can have on their business in terms of dollars and cents. “When I go into an organization, I prefer to have someone who’s experienced in the training field to sell to,” says Tester.

Katie O’Neill, director of training resources at the Rock-Tenn Company, echoes Tester when she says, “As a practitioner with 20-plus years of experience, my observation is that trainers are often uneducated about the financial dynamics of the organization, and they don’t know where their power is located or how to use it in the hierarchy.”

O’Neill notes that if you work in the for-profit realm, it’s the goal of the organization to make money. Therefore, an HRD person needs to ask, Can I read our balance sheet? Do I know how we make money? “I’ve heard over and over again that people in HRD don’t understand how the companies that employ them make money,” she says. For O’Neill, the language of business *is* the balance sheet, and she proposes that it’s up to HR managers and staff to learn the language.

Speaking of using a common language, that’s a frequently mentioned topic when talking about enhancing the esteem of trainers. “People talk different ways depending on their behavioral styles,” says Ruth Nelson of Executive Resource Center. “I find that people who are attracted to HR are people whose behavioral style, not personality, is people

oriented.” She observes that people in HR often speak a language that’s at odds with people in the more task-oriented, technical parts of a business, such as those in information systems, with whom HR staff interact. “HR people,” she says, “need to learn and understand the language of other behavioral styles and speak that language.” One way to achieve that is for HR people to bolster their pitch with statistical analysis or studies.

In best-case scenarios when an organization appreciates that the quality, productivity, development, and satisfaction of its employees affect the bottom line and give it a strategic edge, it often makes the HR function a vice president function, with a VP who sits on the top management team and reports directly to the CEO.

A gender factor?

As to whether gender affects a group’s esteem, there seems to be two divergent points of view. Says Forsyth, “If one assumes that what society thinks of people in a profession or what other people in a company think of the people in a particular department influences the self-worth of the individuals in that profession or department—a big *if*—then it’s possible that professions that are turning pink (adding more women) will be viewed as less prestigious by still-sexist members of society.”

In federal civilian organizations, Salinger has seen a lot of women enter the training field. Many have come from helping professions such as teaching, which is traditionally a female profession. She says, “I think that’s changing as there’s more online learning, including computer-related courses, that may attract males. Assertiveness may also come in to play. If a manager is typically a white male, there may be an assertiveness and self-confidence issue for female HRD people.”

“How people are rewarded in organizations is closely aligned with male rituals,” says Langlitz. “If we look at corporate America, it’s 80 percent

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left-brain, white male. Men tend to be motivated by a hierarchical system, in which holding a high position in the hierarchy is vital to self-esteem. They also tend to be achievement- and results-oriented. Men, therefore, are reinforced more often in the American corporate structure, and females can't find a fit that's comfortable. That's particularly true of organizations that are patriarchal, although women can take proactive measures that create positive results."

Companies led by women or that understand the contributions and value of women tend to be more respectful of women. Says Herman, "The kind of leadership skills that women have—inclusive, better at listening, more willing to empower others—presents a paradox since women are often passed over in leadership positions."

Other people see the issue of low or high self-esteem as universal among men and women, finding gender a neutral factor. Their experience tells them that training is judged on the end results.

Raising self-esteem

What can a group do to raise its professional standing and esteem? David Camp, chief marketing officer for Tigris, a technology company, points out that the first step in raising an image is defining the audience. Who are the recipients of the message you're sending? What are the current perceptions of your organization or group? If those perceptions are negative, the group needs to understand how to bridge the gap between what's negative and its desired perceptions. Therefore, clarifying one's goals, vision, and values is all-important to raising self-esteem. Letting go of behaviors that don't serve the group well is also important though it can be the hardest thing to do. A first step toward realigning a group's actions is an awareness of self-defeating behaviors. Being proactive rather than reactive is another way to raise self-esteem. Many trainers agree that there's power in numbers.

Establishing a strong network is another strategy for raising group esteem. Another tactic: Find a mentor or a tie to someone who's a decision maker.

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ester says that the key to self-esteem is knowledge of your profession. "If you know what you're doing, you're confident in your actions. If you don't know what you're doing, you're not. Period. If you want to create a self-esteem test, test a person's decisiveness. If you want to improve someone's self-esteem, tell him or her to learn the business. Then, teach them to be more decisive."

Trainers also need to take the initiative to become more visible. It's up to trainers to ask for a seat at the table and to make sure the work they've done is placed in the company's annual report noting what kind of training was offered, how many hours, and the cost of training per person.

It's crucial to look at where HRD resides organizationally. One's position in the hierarchy can make a difference in terms of visibility, budget and who controls it, who has access to higher levels, and discretion to make decisions in the organization. Because business is always about bottom-line numbers, trainers need to couch their services in costs. They should insist on making sure senior management knows what has been accomplished in terms of productivity or dollar value to the company.

Rather than curse the darkness with such laments as, "I don't have the budget" or "I'm too far down in the organization," find natural champions in your organization, recommends Salinger. In other words, go where you're most likely to find success. TD

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