

Setting the Stakes for Success

When is a training department like a poker hand? You don't need to be a gambler to benefit from good card sense.

In a poker game—as in life—people often credit luck for their successes and blame fate for their failures. Yet, on closer examination, other factors usually play a large part in the outcome of the game.

I'm not suggesting that training professionals embrace the ethics of stereotypical poker players, but the poker analogy is a useful one. Skillful card players use many strategies that have definite application to the field of training and development.

Training and development functions flourish or decline as a result of many factors. Certainly, professional competence is critical. But often the ability to play organizational politics can be just as important as technical expertise. Playing politics can increase the likelihood that an idea, a single intervention, a program, or a training and development function will succeed.

As in a poker game, it's helpful to know when to show your cards, when to hold them close to your chest, when to fold them, and when to take

By Susan Warshauer

a risk to get a better hand. With concentration and skill you can give Lady Luck a run for her money, and increase the visibility, credibility, and influence of your training efforts.

Learning the game

Obviously, the first step in being a successful poker player is to truly know the game. Trainers can increase their effectiveness by presenting themselves not only as competent human resource professionals but as partners in the business of the company.

While it is not usually necessary for trainers to be certified in their company's field, they do need to understand enough about the business and the industry to make appropriate training decisions. Training departments need to stay in synch with the company—its mission, goals, plans, and changes—as well as with trends in the industry.

Many trainers have finely developed research skills that carry them through the process of program design. The more successful trainers use those same skills to learn about the business of their company and to stay up to date with the industry. Subscribing to (and reading) trade publications, attending industry conferences, and understanding specific issues can go a

long way toward increasing a trainer's credibility and visibility.

Another way to learn is by talking to employees. Trainers can easily create formal and informal opportunities to talk with cross-sections of employees in client organizations. Sometimes trainers will become aware of certain issues before they become real problems.

Once they identify internal business trends and the effects of such external factors as the economy or legislation, training professionals can design programs to address them. Relevant programs are valuable, and even seasoned managers will voluntarily attend programs they see as addressing the cutting-edge issues in their industry.

It also helps to speak the language. Avoiding human resource jargon and learning the common business or technological terms of an industry can increase credibility. People find it easier to believe that a training program will address their needs if the people who plan and design it show that they care enough to learn something about the business. In a study of 26 companies, Robert Desatnick reported that "the successful human resource professionals undertook their mission with a clear understanding of the business, its needs, and its priorities."

Learning about the players

Winning at poker involves more

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than knowing how to play the game. You've got to be able to "read" the other players at the table. What are their styles? Why do they play? What are their goals? Do they provide consistent nonverbal or verbal cues that will allow you to predict their behavior?

A winning poker player is usually an astute observer of human behavior, with a knowledge of motivation, small group behavior, and psychology. A successful trainer knows about an organization, its players, how power is distributed, and how decisions are made. He or she also has the skill to apply this knowledge. It is one thing to look at an organizational chart; it is another to know with whom to talk about a certain idea or project.

There is a myth that hard work makes things succeed. Hard work and exceptional products are valuable, of course, but they might not be enough without careful planning.

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At a poker table, winning the pot requires knowing who is playing for fun and who is dead serious, who is being direct and who is purposely vague, and who is working alone and who is cooperating with someone else. Trainers need to observe the workings of their companies, how decisions are made, who has the power to make certain kinds of decisions, how the players work together, and where frictions are in order to make strategic decisions that will increase the likelihood of success.

Concentration

Good poker players keep their minds on the game. Concentration is essential. In the same way, training and development professionals must remain focused on their own missions. Clarity of focus can help in making day-to-day operational decisions that, over time, determine the reputation

and credibility of a training function.

It is important to have a clear sense of a training function in order to determine a course of action. Clarity of purpose allows trainers to choose directions for their efforts that make sense, are useful, and have impact. In order to choose the risks to take, the times to see a situation as an opportunity, and the times to decline a request for service, trainers must be able to stay focused and maintain a clear vision of their purpose.

The process of clarifying the mission and goals of a training function can also be a way for management and members of the community to help determine the definition and direction of training. Involving people other than members of the training staff in such discussions can increase the visibility of the function and gain commitment from participants. Well-designed needs assessments can help in the process of setting goals and ensure

that a training organization stays current with organizational needs.

According to human resource managers Dave Georgenson and Edward Del Gaizo, "A successful needs analysis identifies the training priorities that help solve an organization's most critical business issues. It helps when making training investment decisions and sorting out those options that will make an impact. It separates training from nontraining solutions and identifies the factors or rewards that will support training. A successful needs analysis helps the trainer gain credibility as a professional truly concerned with improving organizational performance."

Staying focused means that trainers should decline work that does not contribute to fulfilling the mission and goals of the training effort. Realistically, other factors (such as who is requesting a program or what segment

of the company it is for) sometimes influence a course of action. It takes courage not to provide a service, but sometimes that risk pays off. It can be more effective in the long run to decline work.

Author Peter Block writes, "Despite the risk, it is in the consultant's and the client's best interests to refuse projects that do not have a reasonable chance for success. . . . If you go ahead with a project you don't believe in, you run the risk of failure. . . . The reason to say no is simply to avoid failure and the waste of your resources."

Building support

Cultivation of widespread support for training activities can increase their impact and sphere of influence. Widespread support is insurance against capricious decisions to end training efforts in a company. Knowing where you will find support and resistance is necessary when planning strategies for success.

Establishing only a few strong sources of support in an organization can be problematic if those sources fall from favor or leave the company. Trainers who have strong mentor relationships with senior company members sometimes are seduced into believing they are protected. It is wise to find a balance between maintaining established relationships and building new networks.

Trainers can cultivate management support in many creative ways. Managers can be asked to nominate or work with program participants, kick off programs, serve on panels, and help design or present sessions. Managers can preview training or critique training programs or provide opportunities for program participants to practice their new skills back on the job.

The strategic use of evaluation and demographic data can also help increase support for the training function. The key to writing powerful reports lies in carefully tailoring them for chosen audiences. Short, focused reports that appeal to the interests of specific members of management can increase their support of training and their perceptions of its benefits. Needs assessments can build commitment from those who participate in the process and can affect their subsequent perception of a program's effectiveness.

Barbara Bowman, HRD director at Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, reports that "a two-year study at [the hospital] showed a significantly higher level of satisfaction with training programs among employees who had participated in a needs assessment than among those who did not participate."

Efforts to build support for a training function can also help organization members meet each other and build a sense of community. This outcome can influence the learning process in the programs themselves. Participants may feel more comfortable with each other and therefore more receptive to learning.

Handling resistance

Creative strategies are needed to deal with resistance. Some trainers suggest ignoring resistant managers and concentrating on working with allies. They say that news of successful interventions will spread and will cause others to notice the benefits of training programs.

Other trainers suggest trying to collaborate with potentially resistant individuals by requesting their input and participation. Talking to resistant managers during a needs assessment or asking them to review a program or film being considered for purchase can sway their opinions about the relevance of training.

Trainers need to be especially sensitive about whom they befriend. There are times in organizational life when it is extremely useful to have access to knowledgeable and trustworthy counsel. Sometimes another perspective can clear muddy waters, build bridges, or provide a missing piece of information. However, as training manager Mary Texer cautions, "be careful to whom you complain, even if it's in a social setting after work. You have to be loyal to your company and your boss. You never know when what goes around will come around and nail you."

Developing credibility

A gum-chewing poker player wearing a green eye shade and gartered sleeves will not inspire instant respect among tablemates. On the other hand, just being appropriately dressed and knowing the right moves does not create immediate credibility. Credibility is earned, over time, through con-

sistent actions and adherence to stated values.

Training departments need to market themselves and be conscientious about the image projected by their public relations efforts in order to develop widespread organizational support.

HRD consultant Chip Bell advises, "Choose values that promote wholeness, happiness, and productivity in others. Pick actions that demonstrate those values in ways that encourage people to maximize their potential and organizations to serve their markets. Credibility is not built quickly. Your clients first must see consistent quality, durable values, and actions that repeatedly make a positive difference."

It is especially important that the ways in which training departments are managed reflect the values and concepts of their own programs. By modeling effective behaviors, trainers

total organization."

A skill that significantly contributes to the growth of credibility is effective listening. Listening is the way to stay aware of current issues and problems. When people are really listened to, their commitment and effort increase.

A positive attitude

Respected poker players act self-confident both in their skill with cards and their ability to make good betting decisions. They are not easily influenced by others' opinions nor do they succumb to efforts to distract them. They are able to keep a realistic perspective of their strengths and weaknesses at the table even during difficult hands.

In the same vein, developing strategies for a successful training venture is easier if those involved are self-confident, can maximize their own areas of expertise and potential contribution, and are realistic about their

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gain credibility and a keener understanding of the difficulties encountered in applying the concepts they espouse.

Peter Block writes, "It is essential that training professionals be role models for what they advocate by creating and nurturing the entrepreneurial spirit in their own unit. The human resource department needs to be an example of what internal authority, self-expression, and commitment look like.

"In many ways organizations are more influenced by the actual experience of working with human resource professionals than by the words they present in their programs. They empower others by empowering themselves. They don't gain leverage by mimicking how they see other groups operating. They gain leverage, ultimately, by embodying in their own actions their vision for the

limitations. But successful individuals do not let an awareness of their limitations become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Unfortunately, some trainers diminish the potential of their contributions by subscribing to the notion that training is not essential to the success of their companies. That belief is often accompanied by behavior that communicates it to others and thus creates a cycle that progressively and subtly undermines the trainer's self-esteem and effectiveness. In order to be successful, trainers need to keep a sense of their own areas of expertise, coupling their skills with their knowledge of the organization and its players.

Making choices

A poker player's winnings at the end of the night are what really matter, but each hand is important.

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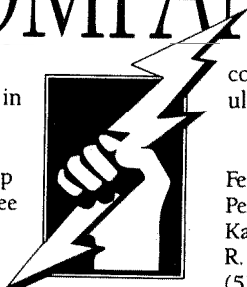
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In the same way, although a trainer should keep a big-picture, long-term perspective, much of his or her time is spent in the day-to-day operations of the department. All of the decisions about the operation of a training function can have significant political repercussions. Which programs are initially offered by a new training function, what audiences are sought for programs, which clients are serviced, and which requests are tabled or denied all have multiple consequences.

Sometimes trainers are able to predict accurately the outcomes of decisions; at other times, surprises appear at each turn. Careful thought about possible outcomes can change a choice of action or can prepare the training staff for alternatives. Time to think through a decision and time to check with reliable community members can allow a training department to frame an effort in a way that has a higher possibility of success.

Learning from the game

Poker has been around for hundreds of years. Its lessons can easily be applied to certain aspects of life, and some similarities between playing poker and running a successful training function are striking.

John Scarne, considered to be an expert on gambling, sums up the salient points of being a successful poker player:

"Before you sit down to a poker game with strangers it is suggested that you observe the game for at least one hour, studying the players' characteristics. See who plays the cards loose and who plays tight. When you do join in, play a conservative game at first, just in case it might be a steer game (crooked game). If you are dealt an exceptionally good hand in a strange game, don't bet everything you have with you. Be satisfied with small, and perhaps the cheaters will decide you are too hep to be taken in . . ."

"If you desire to improve your game, play as often as you can, because skill develops with experience. But don't play in a big-limit game during the learning period."

Whether you play poker or not, Scarne's advice is relevant to our profession. Heed it, and you can wind up a winner. ■