

Become an

In the new world of training, ideas matter more than experience.

Here's a 10-point plan for becoming the idea generator your company wants.

By Shari Caudron

Walk into a training program at Damon's International, a chain of more than 100 theme-based restaurants based in Columbus, Ohio, and you're likely to see employees writhing on the floor like strips of sizzling chicken on a grill. Nearby, several other employees are bending themselves in half like tortillas, while trying to stuff green, red, and brown objects into the bent fold of their bodies. A lone employee is hunched over in a ball, wearing a beige towel, doing his best to convey a pile of rice.

That elaborate pantomime is part of an effort by Damon's trainers to teach new employees menu items—in this case, the sizzling fajita platter. Training at Damon's wasn't always this zany.

Idea Agent

Trainers used to lecture about the menu while clicking through a series of slides of each dish.

“That was boring and ineffective,” explains Larry Clark, director of training, who says that in the highly competitive hospitality industry, in which finding and keeping good employees is next to impossible, training has to be fun, memorable, and effective to keep valuable employees—and customers—from walking out the door. If that means writhing around on the floor like a sizzling piece of meat, so be it.

Welcome to the new world of training: A corporate trainer’s most valuable asset is no longer experience, contacts, or even education. It is, in a word, creativity—otherwise known as the ability and willingness to come up with and try innovative approaches to employee education. Pat Lencioni, president of the Table Group, a management consulting firm based in Emeryville, California, says, “When it comes to training, today’s executives are less concerned with pedigree and more concerned with substance.”

In *The Credible Trainer* (ASTD, 2001), Bob Rosania writes, “To survive, trainers must change their thinking and focus on more creative ways of serving the customer instead of relying on the same old tried-and-true ways of the past.”

What that means in a nutshell is that just because you spent a long time as an instructional designer or stand-up trainer doesn’t mean you’ll continue to fair well in the current and future learning environment. You need to become an idea powerhouse that stokes corporate productivity with new learning solutions tailored to your company’s unique needs. That means changing how you think about your role as a corporate trainer—and the transition starts with understanding why ideas now matter more than experience.

Creativity counts

The traditional approach of bringing employees together in a classroom for an instructor-led lecture isn’t necessarily going away, but it’s not enough on its own. Yes, the business world *is* moving at warp speed. Hospitality companies such as Damon’s live and die by

the 30-day profit-loss cycle. Technology companies’ products become obsolete in a matter of months. And thanks to e-commerce, marketing, selling, billing, and shipping can now be managed simultaneously. In that highly competitive, online economy, companies have little time to devise and deliver lengthy training programs. They want learning that works immediately.

In addition, internal customers have become more demanding. If line managers are going to pay for internal training, they want to make darn sure that learning takes place. Budgets are too tight to allow otherwise.

“Customers are no longer willing to spend the time and money to participate in learning activities in which they don’t see a clear return-on-investment or performance improvement on the job,” says Rosania.

Companies are also facing different issues, including mergers, globalization, e-commerce, a shrinking labor force, cross-generational conflicts, and increasing cultural diversity. Those new challenges require new ways of thinking. “Companies are more open to new ideas now because the traditional models of almost anything aren’t working anymore,” says Marcia Reynolds, president of Covisioning, a leadership development firm based in Phoenix, Arizona.

Because of such changes, it doesn’t matter whether you’ve spent 20 years in the training profession. If you can’t respond to new challenges with innovative ideas that produce results, your career growth may be in jeopardy.

“Because of today’s fast-changing world, technology-driven workplace, and global competition, innovation

In This Article: Innovation

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- Trainers need to become idea powerhouses that stoke corporate productivity with new learning solutions tailored to their companies’ unique needs. That means changing how they think about their role as a corporate trainer.
- If you want to be regarded as an idea maker, you have to market yourself by regularly communicating your ideas to managers, volunteering to participate on taskforces, and being willing to contribute your strategic ideas openly during meetings.

is the lifeblood of many *Fortune* 500 companies as well as startups,” says Annabelle Reitman, a career management consultant based in Alexandria, Virginia. “The need for innovation is not only true for such departments as research and marketing, but also for HR.”

A 10-point plan

OK, so you’re hesitant. Maybe you believe that outside-the-box thinking is too risky at your company or that although managers say they want new ideas, in reality they punish people who go too far afield. How can you possibly proceed in a work culture in which the unspoken rule has been to toe the line?

To find out, I conducted a straw poll of internal and external training professionals on how trainers can minimize the risks of coming up with untried innovative solutions. Using their responses, here’s a 10-point blueprint for innovation.

Point 1: *Forget what worked in the past.* The first step in becoming an idea generator is to hide that file folder jammed with synopses of successful training programs. Managers—and employees—want new training approaches. If they don’t get them from the corporate training department, they’re likely to go outside of the company.

“One reason firms are hired is to provide innovative training ideas that aren’t available inside a company,” says Dennis Lekan, president and COO of Ratliff, Taylor, and Lekan, a consulting firm based in Cleveland, Ohio. “We’re hired because we refuse to come in with canned solutions.”

Point 2: *Recognize you’re your worst enemy.* When it comes to risk taking and new ideas, Lencioni says that trainers tend to be their own worst enemy. “The limitations you put on yourself are greater than the limitations a company puts on you,” he says. “[Many] companies are open to people with good ideas, but few people are willing to step out and take the risk. However, the more people who do take risks, the more who will understand that generating new ideas is doable.”

As an example of pushing beyond self-perceived limitations, Lencioni cites his own experience as a training professional at Sybase, an enterprise software and services company based in Emeryville, California. “They asked me to take over the leadership development program,” he explains. “It was something I’d never done before, and many people before me had failed. I remember thinking, ‘There’s no magic formula here. I can do this.’ I combined a practical approach with

some innovative ideas, and people responded well.”

To gain the courage needed to step outside the lines, Lencioni suggests asking yourself, What’s the worst thing that can happen? “Customers,” he says, “are looking for someone who’s passionate and willing to stand behind his or her beliefs. They don’t want people who are too cautious.”

Point 3: *Think like an external consultant.* External trainers try to approach each client and every job with a fresh perspective. They work to identify the client’s learning needs, bring in the right resources, identify partners, and collaborate to create a win-win for everybody involved. If you fall into the trap of assuming—because of your years of experience—that you already know a client’s needs, resources, and potential partners, you put a kink in the hose of new ideas. But when you start thinking like an external consultant who’s new to the job, you’re in a better position to approach each training challenge with a fresh set of eyes and ideas.

Point 4: *Learn about the business.* I realize it’s impossible to read a training article these days without seeing advice to “learn about the business.” But for trainers to succeed in a world where ideas matter as much, if not more, than experience, you absolutely must (bear with me) *learn about the business*. That means thinking strategically, being clear about the company mission, and creating a set of goals for the training department that are aligned with what the company is trying to achieve.

Callie McDowell, a former corporate trainer and president of AED, a custom learning company based in Boston, suggests that trainers ask

- What’s my business about?
- What factors are affecting the business environment as a whole?
- What do employees need in order to respond to those challenges?

She adds, “I’d recommend that all trainers, especially those who’ve been out of school for a while, go back and take a needs analysis course. If you’re clear on what the business needs are and who the people are that you’re serving—and if you’ve done your analysis on what those people need in order to be successful in the business—then new ideas become a little less risky.”

Point 5: *Become an expert in something.* To increase your chance of success when pushing the envelope, Marcia Reynolds suggests finding a topic you’re passionate about—emotional intelligence,

What Landed the Job

In the semiconductor industry, the term *dye per wafer* refers to the number of droplets of colored dye that can be placed on a wafer. The greater the dye per wafer, the higher the number of chips that can be built onto it.

Marcia Reynolds, now president of her own Phoenix-based leadership development firm called Covisioning, once applied to work as a trainer for a semiconductor firm. **She knew almost nothing of the industry:** She thought the interviewers were talking about “diaper wafers.”

It didn’t matter. Reynolds not only got a job with the company, but she was hired as its corporate training manager—a feat made more astounding by the fact that she didn’t have management experience. How did she land a management job without having had experience in either the industry or management?

“They liked my ideas during the interview,” Reynolds explains. “The people interviewing me were concerned that employees weren’t committed to the mission of the organization. I asked them whether *they* were showing commitment to the workforce. Then we started talking about what it would take for managers to feel **committed to employees.**”

The hiring team gave Reynolds carte blanche to create an employee development program to get everybody committed to the company and its mission. They told her that they trusted her and would turn their heads and let her do what she thought was best.

Given that Reynolds was hired on the same day the company laid off 200 workers (bringing the total workforce down to 700), her task wasn’t going to be easy. But she plowed ahead (despite her lack of experience) and thoroughly **researched the company’s needs**, developed some training that was unheard of at the company—such as teaching classes to shift workers in the middle of the night—and managed to slowly rebuild the trust that had been lost through the downsizing. Three years later, the company was named the top IPO in the United States.

“Now, I’ll be the first to tell you that training doesn’t work without the structure to support it,” says Reynolds. “Fortunately, my company was supportive of what I was doing. But even if you have the most supportive structure in the world, training will be ineffective unless **the idea behind it is right.**”

management coaching, leadership communication, whatever—and then developing relevant courses around that topic.

“If you find a topic you’re really passionate about, the passion to pursue that topic becomes greater than the fear of taking a risk,” she says. “Suddenly, it isn’t about stepping out of the box and worrying about what you might lose by coming up with a new idea. Instead, your mindset becomes, *Look at this cool thing I can latch onto and what the company will gain in the process.*”

Point 6: Learn how to market yourself. Internal trainers, because they’re exposed to many employees, are often widely known throughout their companies. But they’re most often regarded as training people, not idea people. If you want to be regarded as an idea maker and a change agent, you have to market yourself that way. How? By regularly communicating your ideas to managers through memos, volunteering to participate on taskforces, and being willing to contribute your strategic ideas openly during meetings.

You also need to learn to market your training as if you were selling it on the street. “Market what you’re doing with the same creativity and need to sell as if you were marketing your product externally,” advises Lencioni. “When I was at Sybase, I launched a new training program called The Sybase Café, and I made the agenda look like a menu. Half of the employees loved the café, half hated it, but everyone remembered it.”

Point 7: Pursue continuing education. To keep refilling the wellspring of new ideas, trainers should be continuous learners. No big news there, but with the expansion of the Internet and e-learning, trainers have opportunities to acquire new information quickly and continually. And despite the surge of online material, there’s still plenty of new literature coming out, professional associations to join, conferences to attend, and other consultants to talk with. Trainers have traditionally acted like people in academia, reading and researching, and should

continue to scan “to know what’s out there and being done successfully,” recommends Lekan.

A focus on continuous learning won’t necessarily help you generate new ideas, but it can help you be critical enough to avoid short-term trends and look for ideas that have lasting value for the company. Reitman says, “With knowledge comes the confidence that your ideas are sound and can meet employer and employee needs. Staying current prevents you from falling into a rut and becoming comfortable in a set routine.”

Point 8: *Recognize you don’t have to have all of the answers.* One of the challenges inherent in trying new approaches is that you won’t always know exactly how things will proceed and what the final outcome will be.

“That’s OK,” says Lencioni. “I once went to the executive team and proposed spending \$1 million on a leadership development program. I told them, ‘If you ask me to justify the expenditure in terms of detailed ROI, I can’t do it. But that doesn’t mean the project isn’t worth doing.’”

What about the pressure on trainers to prove ROI up front? Isn’t it important to show management what it will get for its money? What’s important, says Lencioni, is to show faith in your plan and have a concrete sense of what the returns will be even though you don’t have all of the answers. “You can do all the fake financial accounting you want,” he says, “but at the beginning of many training programs (especially new ones), it’s hard to show—in concrete terms—what the eventual increase in productivity will be.”

Point 9: *Don’t innovate for the sake of it.* Although there’s a lot more encouragement these

days for thinking “outside the building” (an innovative twist on the well-used term “outside the box”) and greater willingness of management to give new ideas a try, it’s critical that trainers never innovate just for the sake of innovation. “The issue,” says Rosania, “is how to best achieve the goals of our customers and organizations.”

Point 10: *Accept you’ll sometimes fail.* Companies consider new ideas the prevailing way to generate the breakthrough innovations that sustain competitiveness. Previous sources of competitive advantage such as access to capital, location, and expertise are taking a back seat to new ideas. But new ideas come with the chance of failure. Smart companies and smart people know that failure can lead to wisdom and increase the chance of success the next time.

“Accept the fact that you’re going to fail sometimes,” says Lencioni. “Instead of trying to avoid failure, decide how you’re going to cope with it.”

Yes, it’s risky to chart new territory. But the need for new ideas presents a tremendous opportunity for trainers who are eager to take their careers to the next level. Innovation is energizing and more fun. Most important, if you’re excited about an idea, chances are your work will have a greater impact on the organization. The key is to let go of what was successful in the past. If you can get out of your own way and take a few well-calculated risks, you can become an idea agent. TD

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