

Teaming Up for Management Training

Want to increase the payoffs in management training? Try integrating objectives in a team setting.

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Management training and organizational development hold in common performance change as their long-term goal. They differ, however, in their immediate goals: training facilitates knowledge and skill acquisition; organizational development deals with problem solving and team building.

Team learning (TL) provides a way to design and deliver management training to combine the above goals within a single program. Like all other OD strategies, TL focuses on work teams, the basic unit for building new behaviors, climates, and systems. Managers participate in TL as members of a common work team. Work teams may be true "family" units, such as managers and their immediate subordinates. Or these work teams may represent two or more family units that must cooperate to achieve some common task, such as an engineering design unit and a test unit. Work units may also represent temporary groups like special task groups.

TL draws trainee groups from the same people who are with each other on the job. A complete TL design involves teams of managers planning their learning together, learning together, solving problems together, building their team together, and applying their learning together.

Real-time problem solving

TL design includes real-time problem solving; teams work on problems related

to the topic being addressed in the training program. If the topic is interpersonal communication, they identify and try to resolve communication problems experienced in their work groups. If the topic is employee participation and involvement, they identify opportunities to extend the influence of their own group members in such areas as developing new ideas, planning, and solving problems. Using a TL design to deliver performance appraisal training to managers and supervisors illustrates this.

Managers and supervisors rightly fret over performance appraisal; they question the consistency, fairness, and usefulness of appraisals, the skills needed to conduct effective performance appraisal interviews, and the purposes and technical requirements of their own organization's appraisal system. Many of these questions can be answered when managers and supervisors attend performance appraisal training as family work teams with the people they appraise.

For example, when one company used TL to introduce a new system of performance appraisal, the process stimulated the following outcomes:

- Managers developed performance standards with their own subordinates during the training program.
- Managers in the same work groups determined the process and schedule for implementing the new system in their work groups.
- Managers and their subordinates—by practicing using the system—identified many "what if" situations and resolved many anticipated problems before they occurred.

■ Managers practiced performance appraisal interviewing with their subordinates using the new system and developed common expectations of how they should conduct these interviews.

■ Trust developed among supervisors and subordinates concerning the use of the system.

■ Managers and the members of their work teams became committed to the system as a potentially useful tool for managing performance.

Team building

TL design structures programs so that work groups in the program periodically assess the way that they work together during the program. Groups develop baseline data for undertaking specific improvements.

I recently designed a three-day TL performance management program for a telephone company. Participants included first- and second-level supervisors who attended as intact work groups. After each structured problem-solving activity during the program, teams assessed their own performance and set specific improvement goals that they would work on during the life of the program and continue to address after the program. At the end of the program, each team reviewed its total performance and developed a plan for ongoing team evaluation and improvement.

Learning and organizational climate

Climate refers to employees' perceptions of various conditions that influence the performance of their teams. One primary condition that any training pro-

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gram must meet is congruence between the general climate of the work teams and the new learning. This ensures that managers and supervisors apply and extend new learning on the job.

For example, climate changes by the degree to which members of a work group perceive that they can influence the decisions affecting their work. A program to teach managers how to increase delegation will have little practical result if the current work group climate is one in which micromanagement is the norm.

TL helps ensure congruence between learning and climate. Management work teams bring their climate with them into the training program and work to solve the problem of congruence between climate and learning. They identify what adjustments they must make in their work group's climate to accommodate their new learning. For example, in applying the training from a program on delegation, group members will assess the group climate and determine to what degree they can adjust the climate to accommodate increased delegation. They also decide what part of their training they should reject because they don't intend to adjust their climate to accommodate it.

Increasing responsibility and productivity

TL gives visible credibility to the notion that everyone in a work group is a potential source of ideas and innovation. It forces units to develop higher levels of integration around common goals and values. It can encourage work units to commit to the continuing need to improve productivity and enhance quality.

Several aerospace companies are currently using TL as the vehicle for delivering their productivity and quality enhancement seminars for managers. Working as intact teams, participants

- evaluate their collective use of management practices associated with superior performing work units;
- evaluate the way they involve members of their work group in developing new ideas, solving problems, and making decisions;
- collectively identify impediments to productivity that their work groups can remove;
- develop useful measures for tracking the total performance of their work units.

TL also can provide a linkage among all hierarchical and operational elements in a company. In a TL program I now conduct, managers attend the program twice: first as heads of their own work teams, then as

Figure 1—Possible team learning applications

Inappropriate

Do not apply TL to programs that are

- concerned with general information about the organization, such as policies on pay, sick leave, and vacations and information about organizational structures and new technology;
- related primarily to some specific stage of supervisory and management development, such as requirements to make budget submissions or merit pay recommendations;
- designed to develop informal networks of managers across different and widely separated parts of an organization;
- focused primarily on individual awareness and growth in areas such as stress or time management, learning style, and personality type;
- directed toward teaching some new technical skill.

Appropriate

TL designs are appropriate for programs requiring work-group participation, such as those that

- introduce some new expectations of managers and supervisors directly involving their work teams concerning, say, new productivity and quality enhancement initiatives or increased participative management practices;
- focus on group skills such as small-group effectiveness, team problem solving, and work-flow analysis;
- require high levels of common understanding among members of a work group, such as in the case of performance appraisal and distributive computing.

subordinates with their own managers.

By attending two sessions, these managers help ensure that the results of the training program are understood and applied in a common way across the organization. They also link the problem-solving discussions of one group with those of the other group.

Stimulating change

When interaction intensifies between individuals and groups new ideas emerge and innovations are tested. TL fosters structured and intense interaction between members of a work team. TL also prepares work teams to adapt to change. The work units best equipped to respond to change are those with a successful history of involving all employees in developing new ideas, solving problems, and making decisions about issues that affect them. TL stimulates and nurtures involvement.

Managers who participate in TL easily can participate in a variety of other OD initiatives. In TL they are always developing communication skills, group problem-solving skills, and conflict-management skills. Managers learn participative practices, feedback techniques, how to develop common group goals and group commitment—all natural TL by-products,

regardless of the specific content in any TL program. In this way TL lays a firm foundation for other OD initiatives the organization might want to undertake.

TL also ensures relevancy in management training by making it a shared responsibility among program participants and program managers. Developing relevancy begins before managers attend a TL program. Each team meets and sets its own expectations and identifies the specific problems it will work on during the program. At the outset participants are involved in tailoring the training program to meet their work unit's needs.

During the program managers work on real problems and plan learning applications that their work groups will monitor and reinforce. By focusing on real problems, they actively tailor the program content to meet their own needs.

Post-TL activities in the work unit further develop and strengthen relevancy. Every time a work unit completes some plan made during the TL program, and every time a problem's resolution is connected to the program, the relevancy of the program is further acknowledged.

The basic TL process

The first decision you have to make about TL is whether or not you should use

such a design. You have to answer two questions:

- Is the management training topic an appropriate one for TL?
- Can the organization support a TL design?

The goals of many management training programs will rule out TL as an appropriate design. Figure 1 lists examples of appropriate and inappropriate TL applications.

If the training topic is appropriate, can an organization support TL? Perhaps, but remember that TL lengthens the time required to conduct a management training program and greatly increases the involvement of managers and supervisors in the training process. In addition, TL assigns more tasks to the HRD staff and extends the contact that HRD staff have with participants before and after a program.

Teams participating in a TL program not only have responsibilities during the program, but they have duties before and after the program. TL designs typically require an additional half day for each day of training required in a traditional program. The program topic requires its own set of lectures, exercises, and other activities. In addition, you must include structured activities for problem solving and team building.

In addition to the increased time it takes to deliver a program using TL, managers and supervisors need more time to prepare for the program and to follow up after it's over. Advocates of TL must be sure that these demands are understood and that they are fully communicated to the organization. Let's look at these requirements in more detail.

Preprogram TL activities

There are three phases in a TL program: preprogram activities; during-program activities; and postprogram activities. TL preprogram activities are intended to structure the collective planning of participating teams. An HRD staff member meets with each team to accomplish the following objectives:

- *Clarify the team's responsibilities.* TL teams must understand the three phases of the TL design; the three elements in the program—content, problem solving, and team building; and the special TL activities of the specific program in which they are participating. Teams also should designate a representative to serve as a coordinator or focal point. The coordinator serves as a contact for the HRD program managers, helps the team complete any required special preparation, col-

lects and collates any data required from the team, and facilitates the team's postprogram follow-up activities.

- *Set the team's expectations.* Each team should establish expectations about the content, problem-solving, and team-building elements in the TL program. These expectations are tentative, of course, and the team will modify them during the program.

Team members should respond to the following four questions and record their answers for use during and after the program: What knowledge and skill can we reasonably expect to learn? What problems in using new skills and knowledge can we anticipate? What problems can we address using the knowledge and skills gained in the program? What would we like to improve about the way our team works together?

The team should refer to expectations during the program, modify them as needed, and use them in developing the team's action plan at the end of the program.

- *Identify special team preparation required.* Preprogram special preparation activities may include researching certain aspects of the program's topic, completing various feedback and assessment instruments, collecting certain technical data, conducting interviews to determine employees' perception on some particular issue or topic, and contacting other teams attending the program.

- *Set tentative plans for postprogram activities.* A TL program should end with each team developing an action plan. The plan should include problems that will be addressed after the program, strategies for reinforcing and extending the learning achieved during the program, and various other action items. During the preprogram phase, teams should clarify their commitment to the postprogram process and set a date for their first postprogram meeting.

During-the-program activities

The flow of a design appears as three interlocking sequences: activities focused on teaching the skill or knowledge content of the program; problem-solving activities that apply the content to the work team by having it accomplish real-time problem solving; and team-building activities.

The sequence of activities dedicated to teaching some skill or knowledge is no different in a TL program than in a traditional management training program. What is different is that TL integrates the content sequence with problem-solving and team-building sequences.

Problem solving can be performed at

each point of natural transition from one program section to the next. A TL productivity and quality program, for example, may include segments on measurement, flow analysis, and performance impediments. At the end of each segment, teams apply the skill from each segment to a specific on-the-job problem and identify additional problems to be addressed on the job. These additional problems become part of the group action plan completed at the end of the program.

Opportunities for team building arise when teams are required to work together, such as during structured skill exercises, simulations, case studies and real-time problem solving. Team building begins with an assessment at the start of the program on the way team members work together. Then, following any group activity during the program, a team can assess the way it functioned and compare this assessment to the previous assessments made during the program. Assessments identify opportunities for improvement; specific strategies are developed to make these improvements.

At the end of the program each team reviews its performance assessments, identifies continuing opportunities for improvement, and finally incorporates these opportunities into its group action.

Post-program TL activities

Each team attending a TL program develops a group action plan at the end of the program. This action plan becomes the blueprint for post-program activities:

- work through the group action plan;
- identify new opportunities and issues and modify the action plan;
- work at the action plan until it has been completed.

HRD program managers occupy an important place during the post-program phase of TL. They should develop a consultative relationship with the teams attending a program. HRD program managers can facilitate team meetings, provide additional assessment and monitoring tools, help track a team's progress in completing its action plan, and help identify new learning needs.