

Problems Need Solutions, Not Programs

Trainers are expected to provide programs—generic management training. A more valuable use of our expertise is analyzing and solving specific organizational problems.

By KEN MACHER

Candid Camera had an episode several years ago that I enjoyed. Posing as a mechanical idiot, an actress pulled into a service station and asked to have the air in her tires changed. When the attendant tried to explain that this wasn't necessary, she interrupted saying that she had strict instructions from her husband to get this done regardless of the cost—price was no object. They had her repeat this at numerous stations and filmed the reactions of the various attendants. It was really funny; I loved that show.

Some of the attendants bent over laughing; some threw up their hands in surrender and began to do as she requested. There was one guy—he was the one I liked best—who stood there and patiently tried to explain to her why *old* air was just as good as *new* air when it came to tires. He wouldn't do the work; even when she pleaded and tried to stuff a \$20 bill into his pocket, he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Training and development professionals are somewhat akin to these attendants: We are asked to perform tasks that are not critical and by doing them we assume roles that do not use fully our expertise. Whether internal or external we are often hired by organizations that do not understand either the importance or

methods of developing human resources. Sometimes we need to do as that gas station attendant did and balk at client requests for work that will not bring results. Not only is it in the best interest of the organization, but it is a necessary step to increasing our professional credibility and influence.

The HRD predicament

Even though a lot of money is being spent on training, most HRD professionals do not have much clout. The problem is that executives tend to think of this investment in terms of how much it is going to cost them, not in terms of benefits. In the minds of those who review and approve budgets, training dollars are seen in the same way as money that goes to corporate giving and employee benefits; it is a necessary expenditure but they do not expect much in the way of tangible return.

This is not to say that executives do not see the need for management development, because many of them do. But there is a significant though subtle difference between perceiving a budget item primarily in terms of cost rather than expected return. I consider saving for my children's college educations very important but I do not expect that the money set aside for it will increase my profitability. So, as with training budgets, during rough business periods or when resources are needed in other areas, the college fund gets pinched.

General, shotgun approaches to management training fall in the category

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of activities that have little visible payoff to clients. We provide a "menu" of courses, and to the extent that they are well done, they may serve a purpose. They increase knowledge and awareness; they may even inspire participants. But without proper assessment and follow-up we have no assurance that these programs change people's behavior. Our role in this case is to provide a benefit that is long term and not measurable. Regardless of how well we serve this function we will tend to remain in organizational backwaters until we involve ourselves in solving important problems. Thus, we remain on the cost side of the ledger.

Most of us believe that a competent work force is a critical ingredient of organizational success. At first glance this statement seems about as controversial as believing in motherhood. But rather than a mere statement of philosophy, it can become a strategic position: To be successful organizations must ensure the willingness and ability of all persons—from receptionist to president—to do competent jobs. The goal will receive proper attention when decision makers believe that it is achievable, realize the potential payoff and allow training and development to bring its mission and activities into alignment with this goal.

A shift in mission

To fulfill its function management development must change its organizational role in the following ways:

- More training and development activities must be defensible in terms of tangible, measurable benefits to operational goals.
- More training must be aimed at solving specific problems; when general training is conducted, efforts should be made to customize it to the individual participant's developmental needs.
- Needs assessment should be given greater importance; we must identify the real causes of problems to determine if training is the answer. If it is, we want to know who needs training and in what.
- The goal of training must be to change people's behavior; this focus should guide us throughout the design, delivery and follow-up process. Implied in this orientation is our responsibility to lobby for sufficient upper-level commitment to ensure that what is learned in training will be supported on the job.

The chances are that we will not be invited to make these changes, so we will need to provide the impetus. Because this requires risk and initiative on our parts,

perhaps we should summarize the benefits. Then you can decide if it is worth the effort.

The role of training and development should be changed to:

- *Increase our value.* Most organizational problems and changes have a significant people component. We ought to have something worthwhile to contribute in these areas, and we ought to have the opportunity to do so.

- *Protect our budgets.* In difficult economic times, training budgets are among the first to go because training is seen as nice, not necessary. Until we can tie our activities to improvements in business priorities, we will always be vulnerable to this perception.

- *Increase our credibility and influence.* When we are solving problems that directly affect profit and loss we become more credible and sought after. When we successfully deal with issues that have stumped management our position is enhanced further.

- *Increase participant commitment.* Even when executives request a general program of management development, there is no guarantee that the middle managers who attend will share their sense of commitment. When training directors have to make calls a week before a scheduled session to drum up participants, the HRD department is put in the uncomfortable position of playing to an audience that sees no relevance between the programs and the pressing issues they face on the job.

- *Model a learning system.* We advocate learning and change, so we should model it. Our operations must be set up so that we can learn and improve based on experience. General management training does not usually yield feedback that leads to meaningful change. To optimize our own learning we need to hold ourselves accountable to ambitious objectives; we need to build in follow-up and relevant feedback.

Changing our mission and activities in the face of unappreciative and even resistant clients can be divided into three stages: selling our ideas, achieving results and diplomatically advertising our success. At the heart of the process is results: What we do has to work. But the success of our programs alone is insufficient. We must also be persuasive marketeers.

Selling our ideas

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organization already committed to HRD. That gets us in the door. Now we must sell the organization on methods that produce greater payoff. At the management level this means convincing clients of the need for thorough needs assessment and follow-up training. With executives it requires articulating the importance of a competent work force and the role of training in achieving it.

We want to help them see training from a new perspective, not as something that we "give" to employees, but as an organizational necessity. Too often the arguments for management development are moralistic when they should be economic. There is clear evidence that training *can* be a high return investment when it is designed to be.

Training is the attempt to compress experience. We want to take the knowledge and skills that competent managers gain through trial and error over time and compress that learning into a few months. How this is done is another matter. First, we must clearly see our intention. A solid understanding of the purpose and value of training, and the ability to communicate it assertively are important areas of competence for anyone in our profession.

Other considerations in marketing solutions-oriented training are not as explicit. I think of them as courage and political savvy. Courage has a place when we need to say no to a request, or to question the way we are asked to implement it. Peter Block, in his book *Flawless*

Training is the attempt to compress experience.

Consulting, describes consultants who work in a "bent over position" when they allow clients to call all the shots; clients define what is done and how. There is no collaboration, just implementation. But there are times—and we must choose them wisely—when we must assert ourselves. We want to be in a role where our expertise is used and respected. If it is not, then we share that responsibility.

Political savvy is understanding organizational dynamics. All organizations have conflicting points of view concerning how limited time and money should be appropriated. Politics is the attempt to influence these decisions. We want to position ourselves so that our belief in train-

ing and development carries weight. We do this by increasing our visibility, by developing relationships with our constituents and by aligning ourselves with people who have power. We gain support by giving support, by praising others and by responding to their unspoken personal needs.

We also gain power and influence by doing good work, but it is a mistake to assume that this is the only thing that counts. Similarly, we should not assume that just because our ideas are sound they will be bought.

Organizational politics is not "bad" any more than power is; with each it is a question of how it is used and toward what end. For those who are reluctant to play the game it is important to recognize the consequences are limited influence and impact. What's more, we can gain a great deal of both without compromising our integrity.

Achieving successful results

General management training objectives usually are in human relations terms that have no direct connection to the participating manager's job. For instance, a course in communications may have the following objectives: "Will be able to list five characteristics of active listening" or "Will be able to give feedback that criticizes behavior without criticising the person."

Solutions-oriented training is aimed at solving a problem or improving a situation on the line. We still may be running a course in communications but only because we have identified it as a major factor in some problem. The best objectives are in terms of operations: "Will reduce absenteeism by 15 percent." Not as good: "Will be able to coach frequently absent employees and reach agreement concerning acceptable behavior, incentives and consequences."

Sounds good, you say, but what about when a division manager comes to us with a request for all his managers to have communications training; he is not interested in my solving his problems. That is where we need assertiveness and diplomacy. . . .

Manager: Listen, I'd like to run my mid-level people through a couple of days of communications training. Can you put something together for me?

T&D: Sure, I think we could, but let me ask you: What made you decide that they needed it?

Manager: Well, all they do all day is talk to people. And as you know, they have

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been engineers all those years; they don't know a lot about dealing with people. And now they are managers. They need some people skills.

T&D: Yes, I see what you mean. The fact that they don't have people skills, what problems does that create?

Manager: All sorts. Engineers aren't an easy group to manage.

T&D: Are there any problems that are of particular concern to you? We'd like to aim any training that we do straight at what's important for you.

Manager: Well the absentee rate for one has been going up. That's hurting us. I think that if management were handling these guys better, if they knew how to talk and listen to them, then this wouldn't be happening.

T&D: I think that we can work together to reduce the absentee rate, assuming that's a worthwhile goal for you. The first step is to find out exactly what's causing it. Poor communications may be the answer, but if it's something else I'm sure you wouldn't want the expense of sending your people through a training program that didn't result in any change.

This dialogue is a simplified example of how to orient a request for general training toward solutions. (The process of uncovering the key problems and gaining sponsor commitment actually is likely to take several meetings.) By redefining the objectives in this way we clarify the need for preparation and follow-up. Our role is no longer to put on a few days of training: It is to help solve a problem. To do that we must understand the causes and possible solutions. And we want a part in the process until we are assured that the project has succeeded.

Needs analysis

Whenever possible we should conduct a reasonable needs analysis prior to defining training objectives. As with objectives, there are limits on needs analysis of general management training: It is in our terms, not our client's. We might ask them how well they manage their time, to what extent they feel that stress is an issue, and how they would rate themselves at giving performance appraisal. When 90 percent of them indicate that they need to manage their time more effectively we design a program to respond to that need. But there is no guarantee that these same managers will choose to come. They don't have the time; too many problems at work.

A solution orientation begins with managers' problems at work. We conduct

a needs analysis to determine the correct problem definition, identify key causes and suggest possible solutions. We are open to solutions that have nothing to do with training. In the absenteeism case above we may discover that management behavior is a major cause of the problem. But we may also discover that a number of these engineers are in the same age group and experiencing mid-career loss of interest.

Sponsors who are impatient with needs analysis should be led to see its value compared to the waste of a three-day program in communications that has no direct bearing on their problems.

Even with targeted objectives, accurate needs assessment, and well-conducted training we are unlikely to achieve successful results without follow-up. Changing people's behavior is difficult. It takes commitment and practice on their part and coaching and feedback on ours—preferably on the job. However it is done it should be built into the program from the beginning with the commitment of participants and their superiors.

Diplomatic advertising

After we have tackled an operational problem and achieved impressive results we have the opportunity to use it as momentum to carry us on to more interesting and important projects. Benefits from our successes do not necessarily accrue just because we have done nice work. It takes careful consideration and initiative on our part, particularly at the beginning of a project.

It is during the initial meetings with sponsors, when we are agreeing on how the project will be implemented, that we can bring up these considerations. In some instances we may want to ask for their endorsement, assuming that the project goes well. In other cases we may want to suggest a joint presentation of the project's results to key people, or co-author an article in the in-house newsletters.

Joint presentations or articles are nice because they acknowledge joint effect. Advertising can backfire if it is not diplomatic. We want to bring attention to the results of a team effort. The praise should be directed toward the department that actually made the commitment and took the steps to improve.

If the training is aimed at objectives that can be measured and tracked, then it is wise to do so visibly within the department. If we are trying to reduce absenteeism, then track the weekly

departmental averages on large poster board. (Be careful of isolating individuals publicly.) This not only provides incentive and feedback to participants, it places the project prominently in people's minds. They talk about it with peers in other departments and word gets out. Photographs of these graphs make impressive data for future presentations.

Lastly, when we are conscious of the need to market our value to the organization, we think ahead. We begin to spot projects that we would like a shot at, and people whose support and trust we want. We plan how to develop relationships with them and to bring attention to what we are doing.

This article suggests that a change of roles is needed for management training and development professionals, and that we must be the ones to engineer this change. As long as we are delivering general training we are not held strictly accountable because it is difficult to determine our impact on the organization. It is a fairly safe position, unless budgets are being cut. At the same time, it is not a position of great influence.

By moving to a solution orientation we *ask* to be held accountable. It becomes easier to tell if we have succeeded or failed, and moves us into the spotlight. The problem of measuring the exact impact of training on operations is complex. But by emphasizing needs analysis we are likely to uncover the true causes of problems. There are often several. Then, if we are conducting training it is because we are reasonably sure that competence is a key variable. Ideally, the other major variables will be addressed at the same time, and our intervention will bring results.

The transition is high-risk, high-return. We are like the "Candid Camera" gas station attendant. He put himself on the line by taking a stand. He may lose a customer, but chances are that his business will grow as people realize that he knows what he is talking about, and that he has their best interests in mind.

Whether or not we always succeed should not stop us from moving in this direction. Harnessing the energy and talents of people is still the most important and mysterious issue facing organizations. There is a need for those of us who have relative expertise in understanding and changing human behavior to step out of anonymity and directly tackle the nitty-gritty problems that organizations face.