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Tell Us What You Think

Almost everyone who works attends meetings. In Los Angeles, they "take" a meeting; everywhere else, people just "have" them. However they're phrased, meetings matter.

Meetings can induce creativity or conflict. They also eat up time and money.

Surveys of executives and workers alike condemn meetings as time-consuming and unproductive. A study by the University of Southern California shows that a typical meeting has no agenda or fails to follow it. According to one source, $37 billion a year in wasted wages can be blamed on meetings. Yet, meetings are still perceived by most companies as key to decision making. Executives spend nearly 40 percent of their work hours in meetings.

Some companies are trying unusual tactics to make meetings more effective. One firm, for example, has mounted big clocks in its conference rooms. Another limits all meetings to 30 minutes.

Some suggestions from St. Paul management consultant Roger Mosvick are to give participants an agenda two days in advance and to open a meeting with an orientation speech to focus attention and keep everyone on track.

Tell us what you think about meetings, how they are conducted at your organization, and if you know of any innovations to make meetings more efficient and productive.

Send your opinions to "Issues," *Training & Development Journal*, 1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313, or fax them to Haidee Allerton at ASTD, 703/683-8103.

Bowing to the Japanese

This letter and the one that follows are in response to "Tell Us What You Think" (June 1990), in which we asked how American workers could become more competitive.

The data in "Tell Us What You Think" imply that the only help American workers need are Japanese capital and Japanese management. To be competitive, however, we may need to educate American workers better so that Japanese companies continue to invest in U.S. manufacturing plants.

As for Japan opening its market to American goods, if it prefers investing in U.S. manufacturing plants to allowing toys made by an American company in Asia into its market, that only makes our country richer.

Japanese investments in U.S. companies increase our capital base and add to our manufacturing and management skills. They also provide employment for our citizens and high-quality goods at economical prices. And they add to the wealth of our nation, in the full sense of the concept developed by Adam Smith in 1776. We should be grateful to the Japanese. We can help and encourage Japan to continue investing in U.S. companies by educating and training our workers so that Japanese companies want to invest in the United States.

Leon Winer
Pace University
New York, New York

Training Is Serious Business

Regarding the competitiveness of American workers, I think there are two questions to consider:

- How can management and the workforce learn to cooperate in general and, in particular, to channel the already strongly competitive nature of American workers?
- What needs to be done to help American companies acquire and maintain a competitive edge in the global marketplace?

CEOs must realize that continuous investment in training is the answer to those questions. For long-term competitiveness, the amount of money you throw at a product or innovation is no longer what counts. What counts is how quickly a company can develop a new product or innovation and introduce it to the international market. There must be a series of commercial applications that can be continously adapted and customized to different end-user needs.

Unfortunately, many CEOs and middle managers still see training as either something that should be done only when absolutely necessary or as an add-on to some other event. Also, both management and operational people are looking for inexpensive, instant solutions.

Managers and workers must realize that training should be a continuous process, that it generates profits, and that it is serious business.

To gain a competitive edge in markets outside the U.S., American companies should invest in training programs that are culturally adapted to other countries.

Finally, companies have to take risks to create innovative training solutions. Trainers can't afford to play it safe.

Jon Gornstein
Persona Awareness Systems Inc.
Sausalito, California

Does It Have To Be One Or the Other?

Regarding "Who's Responsible for Learning?" ("Issues," June 1990), I believe that teaching and learning are a shared undertaking in which everyone teaches and everyone learns. Therefore, everyone shares the responsibility.

Michael C. Thomas
Commitment Press
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Training Contracts Still Debated

The following letter is in response to January 1990's "Tell Us What You Think," in which we reported that Electronic Data Systems Corporation sued a former employee for $9,000 worth of training.

Training contracts aren't new; the federal government has had them since the 1970s.

In 1967, Lyndon Johnson's Commission on Law Enforcement & Administration of Justice recommended that the quality of police personnel be upgraded through higher education.

The resulting Law Enforcement Education Program provided financial aid for police officers to attend college. As long as those officers remained in law enforcement for at least four years following the loan, no reimbursement was required.

That policy was the government's way of ensuring that taxpayers who funded the program would receive something in return for their "investment." The return was work service from the law enforcement officers who got loans.

LEEP's 1970s policy resembles Electronic Data Systems's requirement that the company receive two years of work from an employee in exchange for $9,000 in training.

More companies will use training contracts in the future, but not every employee should be subject to them. Entry-level and unskilled workers require training to do their jobs. As for skilled or professional employees, they can only benefit from added training. The danger is that the training makes them more desirable to other employers. The company that trains them has a right to a return on its investment.

A training contract should state that an employee must stay with a company a specified period of time after receiving training other than basic skills training—two or three years, for example. If the employee leaves before the designated time is up, he or she should be liable for the amount of time left on the contract, not for the entire period.

To attract the best workers and maintain a highly skilled workforce, employers will have to safeguard their investments in training.

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