



Aligning Training with Business Unit Strategy

By Joanne L. Smikle



Training budgets have gotten tighter and tighter and this fact makes it incumbent upon the HR department to deliver training that is tightly aligned with the strategic goals of the business units. This also means that standard classroom training may not cut the mustard. So, the questions are two-fold: (1) How can the training function be restructured or refined so that it is properly aligned with objectives of the business units; and (2), once aligned, what methods can be implemented to raise the bar on training design and delivery?

Beginning with the first question (creating strategic alignment between the

training function and the business unit)—the process begins by building stronger bridges with the functional units you support. Create a different level of dialogue by querying your customers—and yes, they are your customers—not about the training that they want but instead about their business challenges. Query them about the business issues that keep them awake at night. Query them about the challenges on the horizons. Building this kind of dialogue will enable you to have a deeper understanding of what is really driving the business units. It will also raise your esteem in the eyes of your customer. They will be impressed with your desire to develop a

deeper understanding of their work.

Once you've gathered more data about what's going on, bone up on the basics. Develop a higher level of expertise with the core competencies required to function in the units. While you cannot develop subject matter expertise for every issue, you can certainly go beyond cursory knowledge. The more knowledgeable the training staff is, the more valuable they are to their customers. This deeper knowledge becomes a form of career security. You've raised your professional value by creating a currency that's transferable, even in tough economic times.

Use that enhanced knowledge to begin asking your clients about specific competencies they need now and in the future. Combine the information that you cull from them with what you've already learned from previous discussions to create training that really meets their needs. Now all of this is easier said than done because of the frenetic pace that dictates the work in most organizations. You have to be both fast and flexible because the units you support require that from their employees and from you.

This leads to the second question: how do we raise the bar of training

design and delivery? Accepting the fact that new approaches are always necessary, let's talk about how best to create learning environments characterized by action learning and training transfer. Daniel Goleman, in his seminal *Harvard Business Review* article on leadership, suggests that the form training takes needs to be very different. Rather than using traditional didactic approaches or even commonly accepted interactive procedures, training should instead focus on the limbic system. According to Goleman, limbic-focused training is different in that it focuses on learning through motivation, extended practice and feedback. This type of training addresses building sustainable workplace competencies by giving people the opportunity to use the new skills in the workplace, discuss successes and failures, come back to the learning environment and learn more. The process includes a behavioral component that links skill development to behavioral change. According to Goleman, this approach takes more time than conventional training programs and requires a highly individualized approach, hence the need to build dialogue and deeper knowledge of the business units. You will need to have established a trusting relationship in order for them to let you try this type of approach to training.

Continuing this exploration of innovative approaches to training, there are many action-learning approaches that are revitalizing training functions. Linda Magad, Director of Education for the Chicago-based trade association Women in Cable and Telecommunication, describes a case-study approach to problem-solving that utilizes team-based learning, facilitators, advisors and integrated educational programming on industry-relevant topics. They have introduced this type of action learning process because

they've found that blended learning programs work best. They have also found that the members they are responsible for training want a variety of timely topics.

Magad suggests offering learning programs with a tight focus. This supports the earlier suggestion that you develop meaningful familiarity with what is going on in the business units. Broad, general programs have diminishing value in difficult economic times. Customers are searching for value-added, solution-based learning. Gone are the days when generic courses could be lightly customized.

The third strategy for creating innovative learning is to blend some of the technology-based training programs with structured classroom activities. If you use this blended approach, get people together after they have completed the online component. Use that time to discuss workplace applications of the concepts. Over-reliance on technology may seem to be a viable, cost-effective approach, but, minus the peer-to-peer component that creates training transfer, it is actually a waste of money.

Use the ideas presented to position your training function as a strategic partner in the organization. Targeting the bottom-line business needs of the functional units that you support makes you exponentially more valuable to the entire organization. Once you have determined different strategies for conducting needs analysis, you can then create different approaches to learning. Consider the action learning techniques. It will give your people the chance to transfer their training into real-world settings. Whatever approaches you use, be sure that you're singularly focused on adding value and creating results that the business units can use to maximize performance and productivity. ●



1. Daniel Goleman, "What Makes A Leader" *Harvard Business Review* (November-December 1998): 93-102.