

Training on the Cheap

Joanne L. Smikle

Layoffs...re-engineering...downsizing...the return of the budget ax has caused the demise of training, development and other forms of education in corporations large and small. Unfortunately, the need for training has not evaporated with the dollars. It is incumbent upon human resources leaders to find and create ways to deliver learning the business units need. The question now is how? How do we plan, deliver and evaluate first-rate learning with meager resources? This article presents three strategies for providing meaningful learning support to the business units. Those strategies are Small Bite Learning, Facilitated E-learning and Resource Swapping.

The Cheap Trio

Beginning with Small Bite Learning, organizations all over the country report successes with unique approaches to this methodology. Rather than expecting learners to devote an entire day or a series of days to training, learning is delivered in small chunks that do not interrupt the flow of work in the business units. HR people are not the only ones who see value in this approach. Donna Weston, CEO of Missouri-based Bothwell Hospital Credit Union, cites her company's success with their "Lunch and Learn" sessions. These hour-long events provide a wide range of financial education for all levels of hospital employees. Because it is an around-the-clock operation, these courses are offered at lunch hours on the various shifts.

Weston is not the only one who has used a compressed approach to learning.

Kim Plascjak, a senior-level training professional with the National Institutes of Health in Maryland, has found that compressing a day-and-a-half interviewing course down to two hours has raised interest and attendance in the topic. The course has been whittled to its most essential elements. The training staff provides participants with detailed manuals that offer additional resources on the sub-

nation instead of always using the suburban Washington, D.C. location.

Moving on to Facilitated E-Learning: When computer-based modalities were first introduced many feared that they would significantly reduce the role of trainers and the entire function. What we have learned since then is that e-learning is only as good as the training-transfer mechanisms that support it. While some

employees can adeptly use self-directed modules, many have difficulty. This means that the training department must find ways to facilitate e-learning as well. The outcomes have to be measured in substantive ways. This means something more than 'did the employee complete the modules.' The better questions are how are they able to use the information in their work environment and how has the learning benefited the department. The advantage of e-learning is that it can, like Small Bite Learning, be quick. Plascjak cautions that quick

does not mean less quality. In her estimation, higher quality, whether in traditional length courses or shorter ones, provides a greater return on learning for the organization. This also ensures the viability of the entire training function.

The next strategy, Resource Swapping, is perhaps my favorite. It builds collegiality and support within our profession. It requires a strong, healthy network and a commitment to the entire profession. It can be conducted formally or informally, depending on the culture and needs of the organizations. Let me provide examples of Resource Swapping. One training man-

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ject. There also are extensive resources that participants can borrow. According to Plascjak, the key to success with this approach is that examples be relevant, best practices be made applicable and the courses be highly customized. She and her staff listen closely to what the business units need to fulfill their mission. They have several conversations with leaders to determine which skills, competencies and knowledge are most essential. Plascjak says the course is offered at locations convenient to the business units it supports. This means taking the show on the road to remote labs throughout the

er in a financial institution sees a need for business writing skills in her organization. The budget will not permit this expenditure. She has a colleague who works for the local community college. They are looking for speakers for their annual staff development day. The two agree that they will swap resources. The banker gets one of her vice presidents to present for the staff development day in exchange for one of the college's faculty coming to the bank to teach the business writing course. This is an informal arrangement.

On to a more formalized approach. Two training vice presidents in non-competitive industries decided to proactively address their needs for management development. Once each organization defined the competencies required, the two executives created case-study based learning sessions. They shared the expense of the off-site facility for the year-long, bi-monthly learning sessions. Additionally, they shared the expense of facilitators. The managers got the benefit of peer-to-peer learning with expert facilitation. The organizations got the benefit of the management develop-



ment at a greatly reduced cost.

Resource Swapping does not stop there. It can be successfully accomplished within the organization as well. Often one department will have a resource, a video-based training series or a highly skilled expert, that could benefit another department. If managers are not prompted to think about sharing those resources, they won't. It is up to the human resources staff to facilitate building an internal resource network. Building that network is not enough; it has to be kept updated and shared constantly. The human resources department is also responsible for keeping managers and staff apprised of the resources they have available. Plascjak makes sure that her

participants know of all the relevant resources related to the courses they are taking. She maintains a library of books, videos and other resources that supplement the courses.

Space is another viable resource that can be swapped or bartered. Companies that have top of the line training facilities can swap use of the rooms for any number of things. Consider approaching subject-matter experts with any number of plans. You can ask experts in your area to provide leadership development for your senior ranks in exchange for using your facilities and equipment to record their presentations. You can also invite trainers to teach their latest principles to your staff in exchange for using your rooms for their public seminars. Consider loaning your space to a professional association in exchange for one of their members providing learning for one of the business units that you support. Creativity is the key to creating a swap or barter arrangement.

Continued on page 18

Training on the Cheap

Continued from page 9

Additional Strategies

These three strategies are not the only tools that we can use to make sure that employee development is maintained in even the toughest fiscal times. Since dollars for conference and convention attendance have decreased, it is imperative that attendees be held accountable for both attending every session possible and bringing the information back to the organization. Gone are the days when conference attendance meant ardently making the rounds of cocktail parties and sleeping through the educational sessions. Weston encourages her people to attend relevant learning events, bring back all of the handouts and provide a condensed session on the salient points. This ensures that they maximize and multiply the use of resources so that the entire organization benefits.

A final strategy is one that I have not seen in many years. It involves leader-led learning. Many years ago an executive in a large federal agency wanted his managers to embrace a more collaborative approach to handling people and resources. Instead of relying on the training department, he and his deputy identified key articles and books that encapsulated the core competencies they sought to develop. They used bi-weekly management meetings to address key points from the articles. Once the management group grasped the basic points, they used the meetings to discuss how they were applying concepts in their work units. This approach held the managers accountable not just for learning, but also for real-world application. It also cost nothing and produced great results, not to mention the fact that the management meetings were far more outcome focused.

Summary

Tough times call for creative measures to produce ongoing learning throughout the organization. This requires building partnerships in the organization and the larger learning community. These difficult fiscal times require ingenuity, flexibility and fortitude. If your organization is reluctant to try different approaches, gently introduce one strategy at a time. Be certain to track cost savings, results and outcomes in the business units. This data will enable you to justify the use of non-traditional approaches. It will also enhance your value to the organization and our profession.

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