

Do you have a Training Strategy?

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*“If you are planning for one year, grow rice.
If you are planning for twenty years, grow trees.
If you are planning for centuries, grow people.”*

Chinese proverb

I have often asked the question when consulting with organisations “How will this proposed workshop fit into your training strategy?” or “What would your organisation like to achieve through this training program?” The response has often been a blank stare or little more than, “because we need it” or “we haven’t really thought that far ahead”. Strategic approaches I have seen range from ad hoc programs to over-engineered compliance-focused, competency based certificate systems which do little for core business or for staff development.

In order to get more from the investment in training I believe that these questions are worthy of reflection:

1. Figure out your strategic role.

In ‘Performance Consulting’ by Dana Gaines and James C. Robinson, James recounts how a plant Manager once explained to him that the plant’s primary initiatives for the coming year were to improve metal-recovery operations.” Later, in a conversation with the Training Manager for the same plant Jim was told that the training initiatives for the coming year orientation, meeting facilitation and team building would be added to programs already in the catalogue.”

It would be fair to say that this is indeed, a strategy but not one which will add value to the organisation. One way to create a better-targeted strategy would be to base it on the model proposed by Robert O. Brinkerhoff in ‘Achieving Results from Training’. He suggests that your starting point could be focused on a problem, a change, an opportunity, a strength (that is rather than focus on fixing what’s broke, ask what is right that we can help to direct towards others in the organisation), and finally, a new direction.



2. Get a seat at the board table.

Training is often seen as a cost rather than an investment in the organisation’s future. In order to influence the board to think differently about your contribution to the bottom line, author Susan Heathfield http://humanresources.about.com/cs/strategic/hr/a/exec_success.htm suggests the following: **Understand the business** – You are not in the training business (OK, the ‘L&D business’) you are in the same business as your employer organisation – that’s your primary purpose – not training.

Share responsibility for business goals – when you make plans for the L&D department, they should be directed at the overall business goals (like metal recovery operations.)

Know L&D thoroughly – Your customers rely on you for reliable and trustworthy information about which they will form important business decisions. Be sure your skills are current and of the highest calibre.

Run your department like a business – Look at it this way, if you were suddenly outsourced, would the organisation find your service cost-effective? Start thinking of it as a business within the business and maybe you will be treated in the same way.

Measure outcomes not processes – who cares how many courses you have run? Come on! Is that metal-recovery problem fixed?

3. Analyse the real need

There are still L&D departments who believe they are conducting a training needs analysis by sending out a kind of shopping list of courses or subject areas and asking employees or managers to nominate the training they feel they need. News flash! This is not training needs analysis, this is shopping. Refer to tip 2 immediately and learn more about L&D. You might consider a copy of Robert Brinkerhoff's book while you're at it.

4. Don't blow the budget just because it's June.

A curious disease frequently occurs in the middle of the southern winter every year. It's not influenza though. In roughly May/June each year frantic managers realise that they haven't actually worked out a training strategy or plan, though realise that if they don't spend their entire training budget, the organisation will presume in the next budget year they do not require the same level of funding. Begin a dialogue with the CFO about the real value of an appropriate budget – based on need and strategy rather than a shopping list and this problem will no longer be a problem.

5. A training strategy, is not a series of nice days off

A meaningful training program, that matches the organisations business goals, is

measurable and will be put into action by the organisation's people, is worth investing in. One off training days that do not link to any business plan or skill development plan are wasteful. The training participants are adults and adults like to know why things are planned and what's in it for them. Quick and cheap does not always get results, sure it eats up training budget and shows you are training – though to what end? Never lose sight of the reason you wish to apply a training strategy – what's in it for us and what bang will I get for my buck.

In summary

The trick to determining the training strategy you will use in your organisation starts with you.

How well do you know your business?

What do you want to achieve?

What skills do your people currently have?

What skills do you need them to have in order to meet your business objectives?

Do we have the resources – time, people and money – to run programs in-house or should we search for a compatible training business partner?

Once you know the answers to these questions, the appropriate strategies will become clearer.