

Five Simple Rules for Training

Five simple rules:

- If it's not a training issue, do not attack it with training.
- If you don't plan it, it probably won't happen.
- If you don't measure it, you probably won't know whether it happened or not.
- If it's not reinforced, it won't keep happening.
- If they don't value it, they won't use it.

Maybe they're not rules. Maybe they are just observations. And you might think that they are so simple that there's no need to talk about them at all. But, simple or not, in an industry where the great majority of the companies are engaged in some kinds of training, most companies could dramatically improve the effectiveness of their training programs by following these rules (or observing these observations).

If it's not a training issue, don't try to solve it with training.

Since the output of training is skill, it should be obvious that training should be used only to correct skill deficiencies. Obvious perhaps, but often ignored. We put our people through communications and teamwork courses without regard to the fact that the reason they don't communicate or work as a team is that they really don't like each other or see the need to work together. We put our salespeople through territory management courses repeatedly in the hope that this one will take. We seem to assume that the reason our people don't do what we want them to do is that they don't know how. But that's not always the case.

If we've told them what we want and if we've provided appropriate feedback, there are really three reasons that we don't get the

behaviors we expect. These can be characterized as:

- I can't.
- I won't.
- I don't know how.

"I can't" means that we either haven't provided the proper tools or that there's something in the system that prevents the employee from doing his or her job to your expectations. The remedy is to correct the system or to provide the proper tools.

"I won't" means I understand what you want, but I don't understand why I should worry about it. It's an attitudinal problem. To deal with this you might cause the employee to adjust his attitude or reassign him to a higher value added position in someone else's company.

Only the third one, "I don't know how," is a training issue. These are the issues you should attack with training. But, remember, *training* is causing someone to know how to do something. There's no guarantee that once they know how they will actually do it.

If you don't plan it, it probably won't happen.

Much — perhaps most — training isn't really planned; it just happens. It's strange that in an industry so focussed on numbers — sales, inventory, gross profits — that almost none of those numbers have to do with training.

Planning for training involves three things:

- What do we need to do?
- How will we do it?
- How much will we invest in it?

The first question that should be asked is, "What do our salespeople (or warehouse people or managers) need to do better to improve their effectiveness?" The answer

should be in the form of some type of behavior; a generalization such as “sell more” will not help you create a training program.

The second question is, “Is this a skills deficiency, something else, or a combination.” You may find that providing the skills training is only part of the solution; the other part is motivating the employee to use the skills.

The third question is, “How can I best provide this training.” Too often the initial impulse is to buy something. A video program. A seminar. Books. Audio tapes. The first step should be to determine if this is something that can and should be handled as on-the-job training or as formal training developed in-house.

In a recent seminar, the seminar participants created a 22-objective training program for the receptionist, possibly the most complete receptionist training program in the history of distribution. Twenty-one of the 22 training areas required no outside purchases, no travel, no visiting experts, or classroom time. They involved well-planned, on-the-job training against a one-sentence performance standard.

Obviously, some training should be formal: classroom sessions, universities, etc. Formal training using video or CD programs, outside seminar leaders, or off-site sessions brings new ideas into the company. Equally important, it says to the employee that this is a subject that management considers important.

The down side is that formal training usually costs money. You have to buy the materials. Sometimes you have to pay the instructors. Sometimes you have to pay travel and expenses. Even if it’s product training led by your vendor’s sales rep, you have to pay for the time your employees are sitting in class. That’s the reason you need a training budget. It not only says, “This is

how much money I’m willing to spend on training this year.” but also, “This is how much money I *will* spend on training this year.”

If you do not prepare a training budget based on a needs assessment, you may spend too much money. Or you may not spend enough. And in either case, you’ll probably never know.

In the recent *Progressive MRO Distributor* survey on sales training, less than a third of the respondents said that they had a training budget or that they captured training as a line item on their operating statement. This despite the fact that most distributors would agree that deciding how much you should spend and then monitoring how you spend it is important for any part of the business.

One of the frequently asked questions in seminars is, “How much should I budget for training.” The answer to that is almost as personal as religion and politics; it’s different for each company. However, as a starting point, you might try between .5% to 1% of sales (or between \$50,000 and \$100,000 for a company with \$10,000,000 in annual sales). All direct training costs such as materials, travel to off-site training, facilities rental, etc. should be charged to the training budget, but the personnel expense for those in training should not.

If you don’t measure it, you probably won’t know whether it happened or not.

In the survey on sales training noted above the majority of the respondents said that their sales training was either effective or very effective. However, almost none specifically measured the training; they depended on gross measurements such as a comparison of pretraining and posttraining sales figures, feedback from customers or from the salespeople themselves. None of

those measurements can tell you whether the training is effective or not. Since the output of training is skills, the measurement should be in terms of the skills involved.

For instance, when we put our sales force through territory management training, we hope that this better territory management will result in more sales, but that's the hope, not the measurement. The measurement should be in terms of the output of the territory plan: the ratio of profitable time to unprofitable or wasted time, the amount of attention (sales calls or otherwise) paid to customers with greater growth potential, or time spent prospecting.

If it's not reinforced, it won't keep happening.

Too often we train people to do something new, then we keep managing them the same old way; we just retrain them to do things the way they used to. If training is going to work, we have to continually reinforce the new skills, and we have to remove anything in our culture that is contrary to the training.

Simply stated, it is a waste of money to train people to do things that are counter to the culture of the company or that management will not reinforce. The skills, even if they are well learned and valued during the training, will simply disappear.

Well-planned, properly measured, needs-based training will provide your employees with necessary skills. However, there's one more rule to deal with. It's a major characteristic with adult learners.

If they don't value it, they won't use it.

When we took algebra or geometry or civics in high school we learned it because we were going to be tested on it. It was our motivation, short-lived as it was. But adults require a different motivation; they have to

understand how the training applies to their life.

One of the first objectives in any training course should be to make certain that the employees understand — and accept — how the training will benefit each of them personally. We need to help them see how the training will help them accomplish their own objectives — make more money, enjoy greater status, get more satisfaction from their job. Otherwise, they may learn the skills, but they won't use them.

Most distributors will agree that training is critical to the growth of their business. Because of the changes in the industry, our people need new skills. Because we are a service business, some of our greatest differentiators are the skills of our people. Without doubt, training is important.

But it goes beyond that. If the training is an isolated event, unrelated to the real needs of the employee and not reinforced, it's simply a waste. It doesn't take much to avoid that. Just five simple rules.