



For Managers, Principals, Team Leaders and Internal Consultants

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Issue No 28: Training – An effective tool to attract and retain high performers

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Training – An effective tool to attract and retain high performers

Once a month I participate in a CEO syndicate meeting and three of the top ten issues confronting CEOs in this syndicate, and the many others across Australia at the moment (Surveyed January, 2008), directly involve the performance and skills of people, (or lack thereof) . Not surprising you say. The surprising thing I have observed, however, is the way that people go about solving performance issues.

One approach is to offer more money or bonuses to stay. We have come to believe, (falsely from the evidence available¹), that individual financial rewards are potent ways to drive desired behaviour. Bigger financial incentives may work in some industries and instances; however, when seeking to improve performance it's not that simple. The reality is incentives cannot solve problems of how work is organised and led. Other approaches include sacking the person, finding ways to work around a lack of the required levels of skills or, my favourite, picking a training course from the latest brochure to quickly snuff out a performance management issue.

As one correspondent commented recently, (rather cynically), in an online blog:

“Training is too often used as an inexpensive way to look like you're doing something if you're a manager.

As typically done, it requires little time and little personal change.”

In previous reports I've discussed some of the elements of a high performing culture. They include training, sharing more responsibility, promotion within, sharing of decision making, job security and a positive environment. In this report, I want to focus on how to use training effectively to attract and keep good staff, and also to meet your business objectives.

The view I will take of training is that it is strategic and something that will give you an edge in the marketplace.

It's now well researched that sustained investment in training, (both formal and on-the-job), makes a significant difference to staff morale and performance. Employees are also looking for opportunities to develop themselves and often cite training and development as a key reason for joining a company, (or for leaving if there is lack of it). Good managers know that to retain good people they have got to invest in training them.

What training will NOT fix for you

Training has been known to be used as a quasi-performance management tool to 'fix problems'. As a result, too many people attend training programs hostile to being there because they have just been 'told' to go and they don't know why. They are looking for the hidden message from a manager who hasn't been courageous enough to tell them what is really going on. Rule number one about training is to ensure that it is appropriate to the specific needs of the individual – as agreed by that individual AND his or her manager. Having team members research and come up with their own training options is an even better way to get their commitment and buy in. In most cases you will be (pleasantly) surprised with what they present to you.

So before we get into how to use training effectively, I thought we should just list out some common misconceptions about training and what it can do:

- Training is not a substitute for good performance management
- Training will not fix 'personality' problems
- Training will not fix poor recruitment procedures (no job description, lack of performance indicators or defined competencies for the role)
- Training without follow up and integration into the day to day role will soon be forgotten (with little long-term change eventuating)
- Training is not a substitute for good systems, processes or the measurement of performance; however, in harmony with these things it's a very powerful tool.

Using Training effectively

Using training effectively is about two things: 1) what you want for your organisation and how training can help you achieve that, and 2) what do the individuals within your organisation need to be trained in to grow and develop and be more effective for your business.

As I've said, involve your employees in ascertaining their training needs, and finding the right solutions. Training must be outcome-oriented – both for the individuals going on the program and for their companies. No one should spend a cent on training without being able to define the outcomes and behaviours sought and how the specific training will work towards those. This is not to say, however, that training needs to be complex. Indeed great results

can be had from some simple training and development. The key question to ask yourself is 'what are we really trying to achieve from this training'?

Choosing the right training

An excellent starting point is to assess the current performance of the employee against Key Performance Indicators (which are the targets and results that indicate whether or not an employee is performing successfully), and Key Competencies, (which are standards that are set out to guide an employee on how they go about their work). This assessment can be done via peer reviews, manager feedback, client feedback and self appraisal. The key is to ensure that the data is as specific as possible – that clear examples and evidence of demonstration (or lack thereof) of core competencies are recorded and discussed with employees. Preferably as they occur (and not stored up as a 'surprise' at an annual review).

The latest evidence suggests that an effective way to get clarity on the standards of competency ([See Lominger Research](#)) and where training might be required is to tease out the behaviours that will indicate that the standards have been met satisfactorily. So, for example, instead of saying 'better listening', you would say: 1) is attentive and practices active listening demonstrated by being able to paraphrase a customer's needs, 2) has the patience to hear people out and 3) can restate the opinions of others even if their views are different.

And when choosing training programs, discuss the content with the provider and find out if there is flexibility to accommodate the specific needs of your employees and your business, (rather than a one size fits all solution). Shop around for the right solution – there are many training companies offering similarly titled programs which have very different content, concepts and outcomes.

Training Options

These days training need not necessarily be formal, off-site or expensive. Here are some training and development activities that could be considered:

- In-house training on systems and processes
- Shadowing (observation and discussion) another competent person as a mentor (other than their manager)
- Organising an in-house mentoring program
- Introduce a business coach
- Attending a training course or completing on line training
- Build your own customised training program. Set up your own in house training school.
- Taking on further studies at TAFE or University
- Reading books
- Listening to tapes or watching DVDs
- Introduce tools to assist in completing work tasks

In conclusion – 7 tips and ideas

1. To get the most out of your training investment you need to have a strategic approach and big-picture mindset. See training and development as a key strategy, (thereby giving you a competitive advantage), for engaging with your team to make improvements for all.

2. When you are investing in formal training, make sure that you are doing it for the right reasons and be very clear on the skill and competency areas you want your team members to develop, and how that will impact upon the performance of your company as a whole.
3. Don't use training as a quick fix – or use bonuses as a way of avoiding needed training! ([Read previous report on Bonuses](#)). Be clear on what training can deliver and what it can't.
4. Assess performance against KPIs and Competencies. Use data from staff, peers and clients as input into the training program.
5. Take some time out of the day to day to review the training plans in your organisation, discuss with others and look for opportunities to make training and development a key strategy in the competitiveness of your business. You will be rewarded many times over for your investment of time and money.
6. Involve your team in coming up with innovative ways to share knowledge and experience – 'training' can include workshops, coaching programs, cross fertilization from other divisions, mentoring programs and reading books or watching dvds.
7. Implement a trial, structured learning and development program with a few team members and review results. Adjust and keep modifying and improving to meet the changing needs of your business.

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit. - Aristotle

1. See the work of:

Alfie Kohn – Punished by Rewards

Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton – Hard Facts

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