



LEAD

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The Educated Training Consumer

Why Is Training Undervalued?

Training and development activities can increase the capabilities and abilities of most organizations. Virtually every recent management leaders (eg. Deming, Crosby, Senge), have stressed the importance of learning as a primary tool for organizational success. That said, training as a whole, is not consistently valued by managers or staff. Even when managers support training through what they say, when the time comes to allocate resources for training, it is often the new photocopier that wins out.

Staff can also be ambivalent. We've noticed a shift in the perceptions of employees regarding training. Ten years ago, training was often regarded as a pleasant break from work, a chance to learn a few things and meet others. Now overworked staff are more hesitant to even attend. Being away from the workplace for a day means that somehow a day's work must be made up.

Since we work in the training delivery sector, you might expect us to attribute the undervaluing of training to neanderthal managers, prehistoric like organizations, or burned out employees. In fact, we think the explanation must lie with the profession itself. Perhaps training is undervalued because it often doesn't provide value! If that is so, then the responsibility must lie squarely with training practitioners. We are going to look at some aspects of the training profession so that you can become a more educated training consumer.

The Challenge with Training

In our years in the training profession we have made the following observations:

- 1.** Trainers are often more interested in selling a program than helping you and your staff improve performance or organization effectiveness.
- 2.** Trainers generally move into training from other jobs. Few people choose training as a primary career choice. Hence they are unlikely to have undergone rigorous training in psychology, learning, interpersonal relationships, etc. They are less likely to have formal training in the content they will be teaching.
- 3.** The training profession is dominated by a culture that includes the notion that a trainer does not need to have advanced knowledge about what s/he is teaching.

The Selling of Training

Training is a business, but the focus on training as a consumer item is problematic. While dealing with training vendors, you have probably met with those that come into your office loaded with brochures, and explain how their programs will help you. They are selling products--much like people who sell cars or televisions. It is incumbent on them to create a need for their product. The larger organizations that sell training are often very good at what they do. They can make a case that their program will help with what ails you or your organization. The thing is, it's all backwards!

Effective training isn't a consumer item. It is a service that needs to be linked to, and customized for YOUR workplace. It needs to be based on your business/organizational purpose and objectives, and it needs to address the gaps in your organization that interfere with optimal performance. Many trainers do not act in accordance with these principles. So, while they are very good at sales, and classroom training, what they do dangles without being anchored to your organization. People may come away having learned a few things, but it is unlikely that any discernable differences will occur on the job.

Consumer Tips:

Look for trainers that:

- 1. Ask many questions about your workplace, staff, and purpose.**
- 2. Customize their seminars based on a needs assessment process.**
- 3. Treat training as a consulting service, not as a car sales type of thing.**

Avoid trainers that:

- 1. Are clearly selling a one-size-fits-all training approach.**
- 2. Claim that their program will solve any or all of your problems.**
- 3. Are more interested in talking than listening.**

Inadequate Training of Trainers

As a consumer, you can't be an expert on different models of training and learning. You just aren't going to be able to spend the time it takes to learn those things. Unfortunately, many trainers don't take the time to learn about how people learn, either. Most trainers don't have an academic background in learning, although they may have a smattering of knowledge about adult education principles. But learning encompasses far more. There are multiple ways to help people learn. What this means is their training approach is likely to be inflexible. For example, if you see a trainer do one seminar on one topic, then another, you are likely to find that they look very similar; the learning activities will often be identical.

The lack of expertise in training methods and training content may not affect the ratings a trainer receives at the conclusion of a seminar. Be aware that participant ratings are heavily influenced by enjoyment rather than the degree to which people learned things that they can apply in the workplace. It is possible to create a seminar that is fun, but teaches only minimal concepts and skills.

Consumer Tips

It is hard to be an educated consumer regarding trainers, because the consumer is not usually an expert on training. Our feeling is that you should ask prospective trainers about their background in training, and in the content area they are proposing. Look for people who have an academic background in psychology rather than a certificate in adult education, which is one of the least demanding fields of study at most universities. While an academic degree does not ensure that training will be effective, at least the holder would have been exposed to multiple ways of looking at learning and teaching.

Avoid trainers whose primary qualifications (even certifications) were earned from a company whose products they are selling. It is not uncommon for this certification to be the ONLY one that the trainer will hold.

Training Culture

The field of training is one of the few where the dominant culture suggests that trainers need to know only the basics about the subject matter they teach. It is not uncommon to find trainers who have read a book or two, attended a single seminar, and then feel they are competent to teach in that topic area. We wouldn't want a kidney expert perform brain surgery; why would we want a trainer who is not knowledgeable in their field. For examples, look at the quotes below, from trainers.

"What's wrong with stand-up trainers working in content areas they are not expert in?"

"When I first started out on my own [as a trainer], I said yes to almost anything..."

"...we quite frequently agree to undertake [training] projects in which we are not familiar with the associated "content".

There are multiple problems with this perspective. First, trainers with superficial knowledge tend to teach half-truths and myths without being aware they are doing so. Second, such trainers cannot be trusted when they cannot respond to questions in seminars that require more advanced knowledge. Third, if a trainer can learn about a topic from a book, so can your staff, or at least to the same superficial level.

Consumer Tips:

- 1.** Look for trainers that specialize in the topic area you are interested in. Nobody can be expert at everything, or even many things.
- 2.** Ask trainers about where they learned about the topic they are teaching. Consider asking for specific references that they have used to build the seminar. Knowledgeable, expert trainers will probably be able to give you multiple references, and names of people they have taken ideas from. Less knowledgeable people will tend to give you only one name, or one perspective.
- 3.** Ask trainers if there is any kind of training they will not deliver. This is a bit of a trick question. If they indicate that they can do training in almost anything, thank them and find someone who realizes their own limitations.

Conclusions

If you are hesitant about investing in training, you should know that your concerns are probably well founded. The training field is full of well-meaning but ill-equipped trainers, even in prestigious firms. Unfortunately, less competent trainers give the field a bad name, but rest assured there is a lot of good training carried out by skilled professionals. The trick is to identify them, and their strengths.