

Where training can help decisions within businesses

by Barbara Wilmot

Issues impacting the commercial performance of a company usually focus on staff issues and their challenges and this invariably creates a training requirement. All too often, though, a trainer is brought in only to make the staff feel better and the management look good. This is the familiar scenario where the trainer is a stranger who arrives for the day and delivers an “off the shelf” message to an unknown audience.

Far more productive results are achieved if the trainer can also work as a consultant within an organisation for a defined period of time, becoming immersed in the day-to-day activities to establish:

- Peoples’ skills and styles and where best to employ these
- Gaps in the processes required to meet the needs and objectives of the business (e.g. marketing, databases etc)

An organisation is able ultimately, to take better decisions for its business if it collaborates closely in a longer term training programme that incorporates the objective insight of a third party consultant trainer.

Training resulting from a programme like this re-energises an organisation and helps identify the way forward more clearly. It provides a hands-on opportunity to focus anew on key issues and areas requiring improvement and the best way to address these.

Typical of the issues this type of broader training programme can work with staff to address are:

- Working together differently and perceiving themselves and their skills in a new light
- Becoming more proactive
- Validating a commercial approach
- Developing structured working schedules
- Improving internal lines of communication
- Managing and enhancing relationships with clients
- Owning revenue targets and developing plans to achieve these

In my experience, though, it does take courage on the part of senior management to embrace both the input and the impact of such a programme. The result is that often, only lip-service is paid to the work undertaken by the consultant trainer.

For this reason, whatever its objectives, it is essential that any training programme along the lines described above:

- Is clearly endorsed by senior management

- Encourages feedback from the trainer
- Incorporates brainstorming of issues, themes, problems and opportunities faced by an organisation
- Permits the reporting of key messages, even difficult ones, to management
- Results in a tangible action plan for moving forward

Where training is actively employed to refocus the business commercially, by improving decisions on the ground, the results can be impressive as the following case studies illustrate:

- A market research company was about to launch a new software tool which was believed to offer valuable applications for clients. The consultant trainer encouraged the directors to seek input first from clients about what they really needed – before the launch. The result was a better targeted and more successful product. Training re-focused their thinking, encouraging them to understand the business potential of responding to actual client needs, rather than implementing blindly the solutions that they happened to believe were best for their clients.
- In a service organisation, the prevailing culture was to wait for clients to call with queries or problems. Training broadened staff understanding of the meaning of client service and empowered them to move forward, proactively making contact with their clients. For the first time, they began to pre-empt problems and to facilitate contact in general. Staff learned in a hands-on way how this approach is very different from reactive client maintenance which does not secure the loyalty of the client base and makes it extremely vulnerable to competitive pitches.
- A Media agency was steadily losing business because it was not keeping track of or following up lapsed and occasional clients. As a result, over a period of time, revenues began to decline. Training helped the agency appreciate the benefits of nurturing an already warm audience to find immediate commercial opportunities. This was very different from the initial expectation which was that new revenue and building more business would come from “cold calling” an unknown base of companies.

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