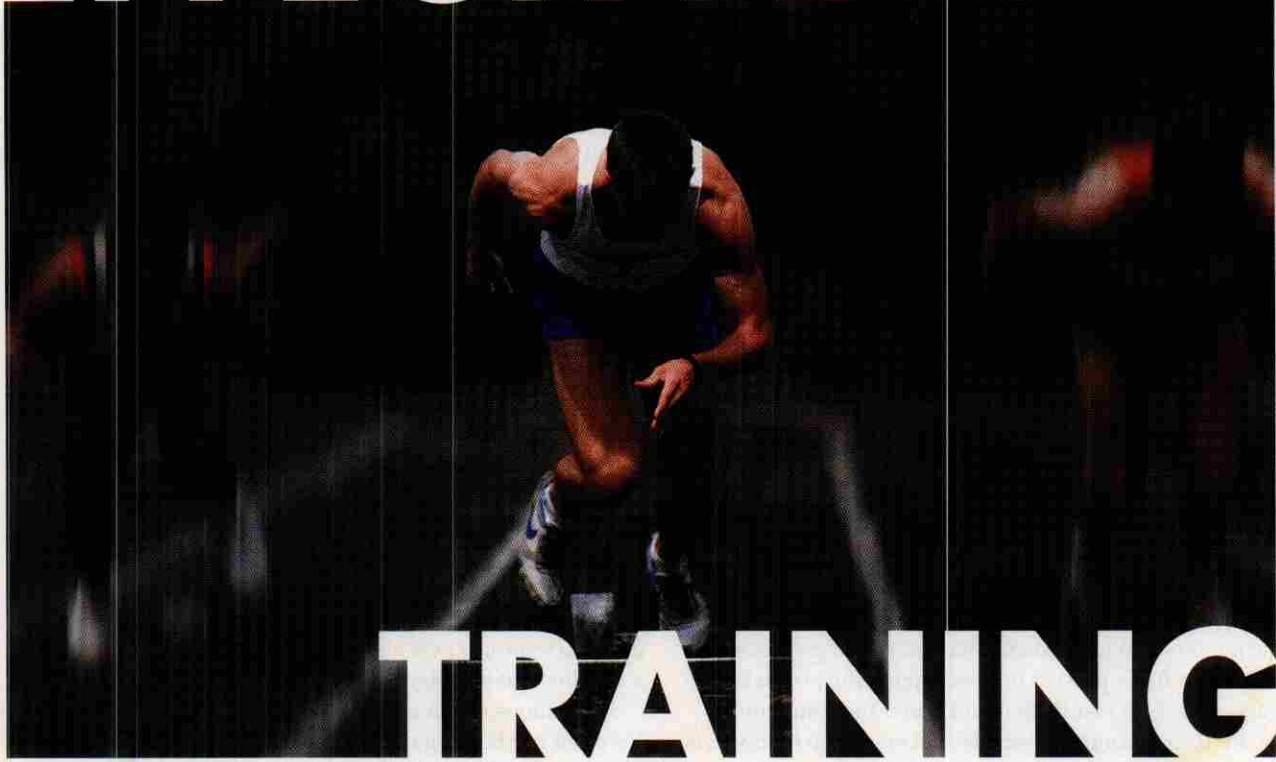


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EFFECTIVE



TRAINING

Today's Competitive Weapon

Your employer, a large manufacturing company, announces it has decided to reengineer one of its key processes. Management's stated goal is to improve individual employee productivity and boost overall output in a particular area. As a team member, you're asked to participate in several meetings to generate new ideas for improving the process. But months later, the reengineering effort still isn't off the ground and few team members really see the value of participating. If anything, productivity has fallen off in recent weeks.

BY SUSAN H. TALL AND LAURA J. HALL

What's missing from this fictitious scenario? What is the critical ingredient that could have made a difference? It's training—the investment in people that typically pays off well beyond its initial cost. With the right training program in place, organizations can make marked improvements in their processes and ultimately enjoy a competitive advantage. The key lies in using the most effective training techniques in an environment conducive to change.

Incremental investment, exponential gains

Today's competitive pressures are forcing most companies to find ways to improve their processes and ultimately provide better quality products and services at a lower cost. If they believe there are real gains to be made, most organizations will commit the



Team members use an experiential training tool to simulate a production environment. The process of producing a small toy boat teaches the hands-on skills and behaviors that can induce change and improve productivity.

time and money required for a reengineering program. But often, they overlook training as an essential component of that program.

The incremental investment made in training—before, during, and after a process improvement effort—can turn average gains into results that far exceed the company's goals. By using training to ensure that everyone involved is able and willing to participate, organizations greatly increase the odds that the investment they make in improving a process will be far exceeded by the gains made.

Training often helps to fuel gains that manifest themselves in tangible, measurable ways—through increased productivity, improved efficiency, or a lower cost of doing business. In some cases, the actual gains can exceed the original goals by tenfold or more.

But bottom-line results aren't the only benefits an effective training program can offer. Training can provide employees with the ability to express their needs and communicate more effectively in a team environment. It can demonstrate to all team members that they are part of a greater whole and able to contribute to that whole. And it can build a sense of community in the organization by boosting self-confidence, self-esteem, and a feeling of camaraderie. Though difficult to quantify, those benefits are just as valuable as any financial gain—particularly in team-oriented work environments.

In today's increasingly competitive business world, most companies invest in some form of training. Research conducted by the American Society of Training and Development indicates that the average company spent slightly more than \$1,500 per employee on training in 1996—up from about \$1,400 the previous year. Measured another way, the average company spent about 0.52 percent of its total sales on training in 1996.

But how effective is the training conducted by most companies, and does it truly result in sustainable change and improvements? The answer depends, in part, on the style of training used.

Making the connection

While there's considerable talk about technology-based delivery vehicles—such as Web-based training—much training still takes place in a traditional classroom setting. But the lecture technique may not always be the best approach. Lecture-style training relies on the skill of listening, which may not be a given employee's strong suit. In fact, it is one of the weakest skills of most adults.

Consider the typical training session. A group of employees comes together to improve a given process or to learn a particular skill. Often, the group comprises all of the team members from a particular department or production line. The backgrounds, skill levels, job responsibilities, and values of those individuals are likely to vary tremendously. With such a heterogeneous group, it's inevitable that there will be tremendous differences in learning styles. Some favor auditory learning, others must talk about the training topic before understanding it, while still others must have a tactile experience.

No matter what style an individual prefers, evidence suggests that most people learn best when all of their senses are engaged. This style of learning is known as *experiential learning*.

An experiential training model uses real-life, case study approaches to address a specific business need or body of knowledge. Often called a "simulation" technique, experiential training simulates a particular process or activity in order to reinforce new skills or knowledge by using them in a real-life environment.

Simulations can take many different forms. As trainers, we often use board games that replicate a work process, the steps involved, and the constraints a team member may encounter. Such games would be examples of simulations or experiential training tools. By encouraging interaction in a fun, nonthreatening environment, simulations such as these can encourage ownership among participants and discourage the kind of defensive behavior that can prevent effective learning.



Process simulation games can help staff to understand how various factors influence their individual performance—and how their actions influence the work of other team members.

Whatever form it takes, experiential training can directly address the challenges involved in getting groups of people to learn and apply new skills and knowledge effectively. Numerous studies have shown that, for adult learners, there is no way to ensure mastery of a skill or body of knowledge except to have the learner demonstrate it, hands-on. Experiential training provides that opportunity.

Likewise, it can be difficult for participants to accept that they are capable of learning a new skill or using the information that is being taught. Experiential training allows participants to prove to themselves that they are capable of learning. Finally, experiential training techniques can overcome the natural disparities that exist within any training group by appealing to people of all learning styles.

Relevance is the key

For all of their benefits, even real-life simulations can fall short of expectations if they're not relevant to the participants. Experiential training works best when it is tightly integrated into the actual process participants use in their daily work. By integrating the theory into a process that team members live and breathe every day, the training makes the new concepts and skills "come to life." For example, if a training effort is designed to teach a group of production workers how to improve their semiconductor assembly line, it should simulate that line and the steps involved in the process.

One industrial company used an experiential training technique to kick off a program aimed at improving both

quality and production on one of its assembly lines. The company used an experiential training "game"—complete with playing pieces and dice—to teach the specific concepts employees would need to understand to transform their own processes. Through several rounds of play, team members learned how to eliminate non-value-added steps from their work processes, the role of good communication, and the value of teamwork in achieving goals. Then they applied the concepts learned in the simulation to their actual work process. This experiential training session tested new skills and concepts in an environment that was familiar and comfortable for the participants.

Integrating training into a company's actual work process has many benefits. So why isn't it done more often? Probably because this style of training takes a greater investment of time and resources on the part of the trainer and the company.

Clearly, the trainer must understand the process before attempting to simulate it, which means the trainer must observe the process and talk with managers or supervisors to document the key steps. At the same time, the organization's management must invest the time and resources necessary to work with trainers in order to merge the training into employees' work processes. At one manufacturing company, management took a hands-off approach to the entire training effort, but still set aggressive goals for the process improvement. Not surprisingly, the entire process improvement program was never really accepted by team members and failed to meet its goals.

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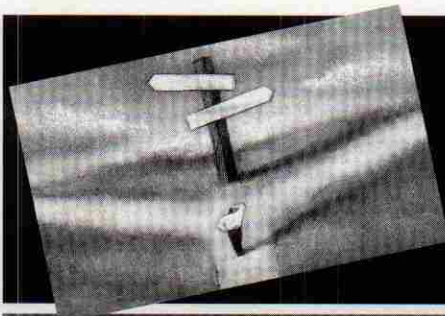
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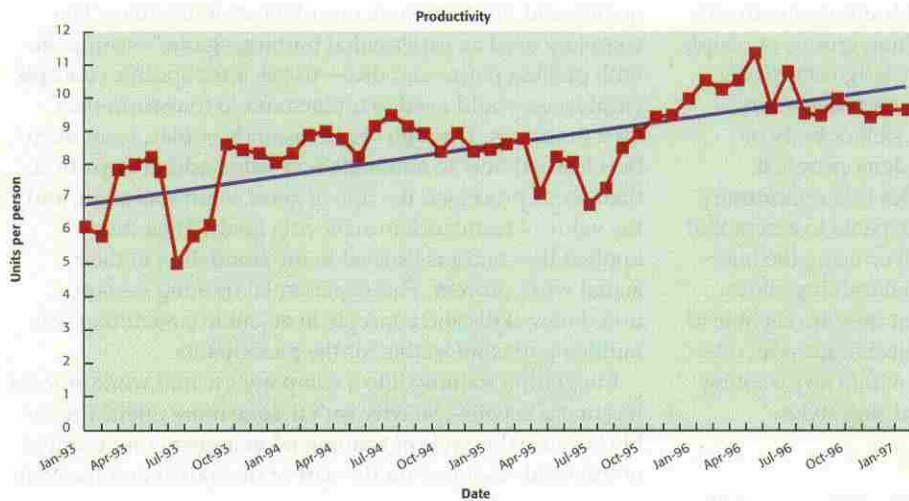


Figure 1. Company "A" productivity. By getting buy-in from most team members during the training process, this company enjoyed steady, consistent improvements in its productivity over a four-year period. Improvements averaged 25 percent to 30 percent over the period.

Make it clear

Regardless of the training technique used, one of the keys to success lies in good communication among all parties involved, at every stage of the game. Simply having management introduce the training with a speech about goals and objectives isn't enough. Going beyond this one-way communication can spell the difference between a lukewarm response and a true change in attitudes, behaviors, and skills.

Good communication can dispel fears or clear up misconceptions about the purpose of the training. Some employees may view training as an indictment—a charge by the company that they aren't doing the best job possible. This mindset can severely hamper an employee's ability (and willingness) to grasp and apply new concepts.

The most successful organizations position their training efforts into a larger context—one in which everyone understands the need for and the value of training. For example, the rapid pace of technological change may require your

company to invest significantly in new skills development—even at times when the company is performing well. By communicating that need to employees, management can avoid discontent, rumors of a company downturn, or worse.

The best training programs begin with an open discussion among all players involved. "Open" means a two-way dialogue, in which all parties share their views about the process or skill that the training will address. Some companies use an employee survey to get the dialogue going, while others hold an open, interactive forum.

Regardless of the format, it's important for the initial communication to address several elements, including expectations for the training, goals, and objectives; any perceived obstacles; and the benefits to everyone. In terms of the latter, it's critical to acknowledge not only the advantages the company will enjoy if the training goes well, but the benefits to individuals as well.

For example, the training may provide the kinds of skills necessary for employees to advance their careers. Or it may allow the company to limit its use of part-time or contract labor and instead retain more full-time, permanent employees. Whatever the benefit, it's crucial to communicate it clearly.

Another key to good communication is repetition. Few of us really "get" something the first time we hear it, especially if the message is only delivered verbally. When crafting a training program, take a cue from the classic presentation style: tell them what they're going to do, have them do it, then tell them what they've done. When the message is reinforced several ways, participants are likely to remember it long after the training is over.



Figure 2. Company "B" productivity. Tremendous support and buy-in from senior management fueled dramatic change at this company, which realized productivity improvements of nearly 50 percent.

Clearing the hurdles

If the trainers do their jobs right, the implementation of an effective training program should look very easy. But behind the scenes, a great deal of preparation is necessary to avoid trouble and overcome the most common obstacles. Some of these include the following:

- *Misunderstood goals and objectives*—A lack of information typically creates this problem, and it can derail a training program before it

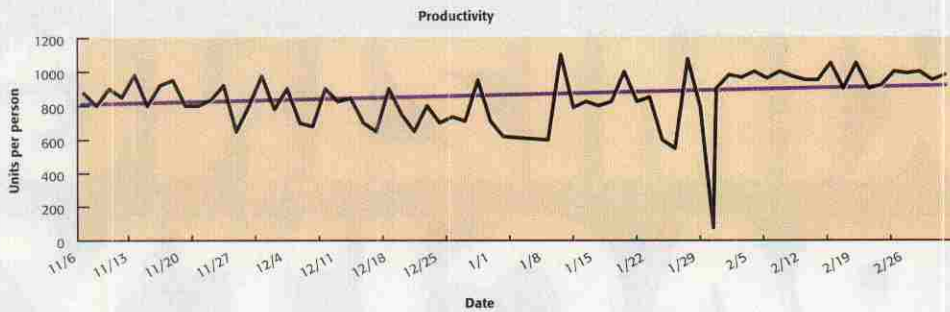


Figure 3. Company "C" productivity. Without middle management's support of the project and the training, this company realized productivity gains of only about 9 percent. There were a number of significant fluctuations along the way.

even begins. But it's equally important to be sure any information provided is clear and direct. One way to find out if the communication has been clear is to ask participants to reiterate the goals and objectives presented.

- *Lack of buy-in from all parties*—A plastics manufacturer wanted to improve its work processes and used an experiential training exercise to start the effort. The company owners and a majority of team members were committed to the program and its intended outcomes. But middle managers—the people with the power to encourage real change among team members—didn't believe the program was necessary. Not surprisingly, the program never got off the ground.

On the other side of the spectrum, management at a window manufacturing company got buy-in for its process improvement program from everyone involved and communicated the message that "we're all in this together." The process improvements far surpassed the company's goals in numerous areas, and the company has maintained those improvements long after the initial training. See Figures 1-3 for examples of how buy-in of training programs can affect productivity.

- *Failure to ask participants for input*—Soliciting ideas and input from team members up front demonstrates that the company is open to change and willing to listen. The best way to gather that input is to ask team members open-ended questions that reveal their mindsets, fears, concerns, wishes, and expectations relative to the task at hand.

- *Inadequate time allocated*—If the training effort takes too much time, participants become bored and unable to maintain focus. Conversely, if the training is rushed, participants may not have enough time to learn new concepts and apply them. Be realistic about the time the training will take.

- *Distractions*—These include disruptive people who continually interrupt the program, employees who bring cell phones into the training room, and people who see the training session as the perfect opportunity to air other grievances. To prevent the disruptive person, you must know the audience up-front and identify potential malcontents before the session starts. Avoiding the cell phone type of problem might involve a message from management that no such disruptions will be permitted. Giving people enough notice of the training session also can help avoid disruptions, since they'll have the chance (hopefully) to complete critical work before the training begins.

- *Diverse skill levels*—This is almost inevitable to some extent, since a given work process or department will always involve a variety of employees and job responsibilities. The first step in overcoming this obstacle is to do the necessary homework to identify any such disparities. From there, it's often possible to turn the negative into a positive. For instance, teaming two people with diverse but complementary skills can give each a chance to mentor the other.

Conclusions

The right training program can lay the groundwork for long-lasting process improvements—and the resulting financial benefits those improvements can offer. While many challenges can surface, the potential rewards far outweigh the obstacles. By combining the right training technique with advance preparation and a commitment to clear communication, today's organizations can set the stage for dramatic improvements in their work processes—and enjoy a greater competitive advantage in the marketplace. ■

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