

Training Wheels: A Manual to Shift Your Company Into High Gear

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"According to a December 2008 survey of 117 large U.S. companies by Watson Wyatt Worldwide Inc., 23 percent had recently cut training programs and another 18 percent planned to do so in 2009."

In this tough economy, training often is given a low priority—or eliminated altogether. There are many advantages to effective training, from developing leaders within your organization and creating rainmakers, to fostering loyalty from your staff because you care enough to invest in their skills and careers. But for training to be justified, it must have quantifiable, measurable results. And whether the subject is sales, technical, or presentation, the methodology of how these skills are trained is just as important as the content delivered. Following are seven tips to make sure training dollars are well spent.

1. One plus one equals three:

Ten years ago, we joined forces to form Eloqui, a communication and training company. The combination of our talents as director and actor was the foundation of our partnership. Our experience has shown that pairing a male and female trainer as team presenters also is the formula for drawing the most out of attendees in a seminar or workshop.

The old paradigm of team presenting was defined as "I'll take the first hour and then you'll take the second." This is not handing off, but serial instruction. In our newly released book "Own the Room," we devote an entire chapter to "Team Presenting." These hand-off skills are translated from the world of ensemble acting in the theater. They are easily learned, yet reap enormous benefits.

As instructors hand-off content to one another, they create a high degree of energy and interest in the room. And like any great piece of music, counterpoint holds our attention more than a single instrument playing an entire piece—especially over an extended period of time.

The other value of two trainers is they offer different perspectives, similar to the makeup of the attendees. The role of each instructor can be further delineated. For example, one assumes a big picture role, while the other is in charge of details. The "big picture" instructor provides examples, strategy, and direction, while the "process," or detail person, keeps the agenda on track and elicits participants' comments.

2. Enough about me...What do you think of me?

At Fisher-Price, we were scheduled to train a group of executives on presentation skills. They were late to arrive, hugged the back of the room, and telegraphed disinterest. After repeated questioning, we discovered we were not the first company Fisher-Price had brought in. An actor-turned-trainer led a previous presentation skills workshop that was not well received. It wasn't the content, but the lack of customization that frustrated participants.

In the previous training, when Mike (a participating manager) delivered his presentation, the instructor told him he was not animated and did not move enough. Mike's style was laid back and he resisted portraying someone he was not. The instructor was not satisfied. He began moving around the room, waving a \$20 bill in front of Mike, taunting him to grab it. In frustration, Mike lunged for the bill, tore his hamstring and was rushed to the hospital. What was amazing was that Mike returned for any other workshop.

The lesson here is that effective training delivers tools each individual can adapt to their own personal style. A homogenous, one-size-fits all agenda is doomed to failure. When a company CEO tells us they want all their people to express the same corporate message, we do our best to re-direct his intention. What works is for each individual to assimilate the corporate message into their own language, their own examples, and their own style. Like Mike, a laid back individual will always be uncomfortable with a "motivational speaker" style of delivery. Authenticity is essential for persuasion, credibility, and buy-in. It is up to trainers to instill enthusiasm for the concepts, and provide the tools to make the material their own.

3. Interactivity

Considering we remember only 10 percent of what we hear, 20 percent of what we read, but 80 percent of what we say and do, lecturing is the least effective means of imparting information. When we listen to a lecturer, we are passive. When we question what is being said, apply it to our own experience, and/or test out theories with a colleague, we are actively engaged and placing new information into long term memory. Yet, many seminars or training sessions still are lecture driven, with an instructor speaking over the course of many hours and up to a full day.

When Eloqui was called in to train engineers at Wyse Technology, we walked into a room where every one of the ten participants had their laptops open, or were clicking away on their Blackberrys. To avoid boredom, and preparing for another lecture, they were ready to multi-task, respond to e-mail, or visit Websites. After a brief introduction, we asked each individual to describe what they wanted to accomplish, and then launched into an interactive exercise. We also gave them a 15-minute break every two hours to check their email and voicemail. The laptops and Blackberrys were no longer an issue.

Specific interactive techniques include asking a participant to 1. re-state the instructions in their own words; 2. summarize the take-a-ways at the conclusion of an exercise, and 3. relate the application of lessons learned to their particular job. A recent survey of college students (included in our book "Own the Room") asked students to rank their favorite professors. Interestingly enough, the highest ranking professors were not the most articulate or knowledgeable—but the ones who created an environment where the students did most of the speaking.

Devising interactive exercises; pairing up attendees to debate and respond to one another; and including multiple break-out sessions is the best way to cement learning and increase content retention.

4. Layering skills

When you build a house, you start with the foundation before adding the framing, bricks, or rooms. Successful training delves deep into one concept, exercise, or idea (the foundation), and makes sure participants have absorbed it before layering on the next one. Following this line of thinking, shorter programs of up to four hours are better than one-to-two day trainings, unless the logistics of bringing people together makes this impossible.

Ideally, shorter trainings are spaced a few weeks apart for participants to practice their new-found skills, before returning for more. Author John Medina, in his book "Brain Rules" calls this spaced learning. Under stress, or when a lot is riding on the outcome, we typically revert to the default mode of how we've always operated. The best way to change behavior is to first try out a new skill in a low ante environment. See how it feels. Process the response. Repeat the action or technique until it becomes the new default mode.

If financially feasible, we recommend trainers make themselves available for phone or e-mail consults after a seminar. This will further solidify and reinforce the adoption of new skills.

5. Call and response

From a trainer's perspective, there are no wrong answers. The best trainers acknowledge the thinking behind a response, ask questions to further understand the rationale, and if appropriate, encourage the individual to go deeper. The goal is to stimulate thinking and new ideas. And once a new concept is put forward, trainers need to examine it in depth, rather than overwhelm the participants with too many ideas at a superficial level.

Direct and specific feedback can facilitate positive change and growth for participants. However, critical feedback also can shut someone down, cause resentment, or derail the training. A trainer needs to express what they like, or consider creative, in each exercise. Then the participants will be open and receptive to recommendations for improvement.

The trainer also can ask the group what they noticed, observed, or liked about the participants' exercise.

Caution. Before asking for observations from the group, be sure to instruct them to keep their comments professional and not personal. Years ago, an attendee at an Eloqui workshop, Michelle, gave her presentation to the group. When asked for comments, one of the other attendees said "what's with your bangs?" Michelle was deflated and did not hear any other of the more relevant comments.

Once the participant has heard from the trainers and the group, allow them to do a "Take 2." In our experience, there always is measurable improvement. It is much more effective to immediately incorporate feedback and re-do the exercise than to simply hear comments, sit down, and wait for another opportunity to speak.

The other advantage of developing critical acumen and encouraging feedback is that participants are learning to speak the same language. After the training, the attendees can turn to and count on each other. You have, in effect, doubled the initial investment in training.

6. Failure is an option

Learning doesn't have to be painful. Why else would the DMV have devised comedy traffic school? The best training provides a safe environment, where it's OK to take risks and go outside your comfort zone. We know from cognitive science that when you have fun and laugh, concepts are more likely to stick. The brain is in a more receptive and attentive state.

When Eloqui was training engineers at Intuit, many of the foreign born participants were reluctant to take part in the exercises. They were used to feeling out of place and not quite understanding American culture. One exercise we include to overcome this challenge is called "taking risks." An individual draws a slip of paper with a character on it, e.g. motorcycle gang member, over-the-top actor, or bad Las Vegas entertainer, etc. The instructions are to deliver two-to-three minutes of content through this character—their voice and mannerisms. A shy, Thailand-born engineer, Don drew the over-the-top actor character and proceeded to describe an encounter with the police at the Chiang Mai night market. He was very funny, and the group responded with peals of laughter. Don's face lit up. This was the first time he felt accepted and connected to an audience. The response encouraged him to do more. As he added physical movement to his storytelling, he captivated the room. From that point on, it was easy to get Don to fully participate in other exercises.

7. Physical environment

Typically, little thought is devoted to the actual training space. We've traveled all over the country for training, and more often than not, are directed to small, airless rooms with fluorescent lighting and no way to change the temperature. It's hard to tell if we're

in California or Cleveland.

There's an old saying, "the mind can only absorb what the seat can endure." For trainings to be most effective, the space needs to be large enough to accommodate all participants, with room to move about. Make sure the space is light and airy. Ideally, there are windows that look out onto a landscape. When we trained our first group of vice-presidents in Institutional Sales at TD Ameritrade, they arranged for a room overlooking the Navesink River in one of the most attractive areas of New Jersey.

Supply healthy snacks and drinks in the back of the room to keep everyone fueled. And give participants regular breaks to socialize with one another, as well as catch up on e-mail and phone calls.

The key to successful training is to provide every opportunity for optimal learning. It's just like riding a bicycle. Once someone truly learns a skill, they never forget it. When training is valuable and quantifiable, it won't be under-estimated or slashed from the budget—even during hard times.

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