

Assessing Your Training Needs

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The training industry as a whole derives much of its success from direct mail. Every year millions of pounds of mailers, magazines and postcards welcome entrepreneurs to the latest and greatest training event on “whatever class.” Broad topics are offered that fill seats in large auditoriums and sell thousands of back of the room books.

All is not lost on these ample opportunities. Most attendees come away from the day having heard at least one thing new. But at the end of the day these showcase events often unveil a sense of “dart at the target approach” to training and rarely deliver the real value gained by first assessing your training needs.

Dare we take it to the next level? Let’s do. Our friends in the large corporate sector of the business world have figured out some great secrets over the years, and while not all corporate strategies fit the entrepreneurial concern, there are some nuggets to be gained.

Nugget 1

Training needs are discovered in a strategic plan. Calm down. It’s always darkest before the dawn and not all strategic planning is painful. What’s really called for here is the identification of “core competencies” for your organization. Business leaders (large and small) have discovered through experience that aligning the skills and knowledge of human capital with the goals of the business makes customer centric organizations and cash flow.

So what is a core competency? A core competency is a set of knowledge and skills that create sustained competitive advantage for your company. They are your most invisible assets and show up in the form of individuals and teams. Commonly used core competencies include things like strategic thinking, problem solving, relationship management, team building, decision making, customer focus, innovation, creativity and communication.

Factors that might make up a competency definition include personality, knowledge, ability, motivation and interest. Aligning these competencies to the mission/vision/values of the organization is critical as well.

So, how is training found in a strategic plan? Once your goals are set, it’s time to begin identifying and defining the core competencies that best support those goals. These core competencies act as filters and drive training dollars to create the foundation for the training plan.

Nugget 2

Understand where you are today. As with anything, choosing the best tool for the job generates the greatest outcome. Assessment tools are designed to provide specific measurements.

To illustrate the point, let’s say you have a manager that supervises 5 employees. Her ability to manage the team well directly effects several of the core competencies of the organization. But what does this manager actually know about leadership and good management skills?

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If you attempt to assess for this knowledge with a perception based tool, the outcome will be an opinion from the manager about his/her own management skills, rather than the identification of actual knowledge.

On the other hand, using a knowledge based assessment tool will more closely identify what the manager actually “knows” about leadership skills. The outcome can give you specific information about the true knowledge level of the manager and can identify specific areas of development need.

This is not to say that perception, skill, personality and other assessment tools don’t have value. Of course they do. Just make sure to align the information you need to gain with the appropriate tool. In doing so you will identify gaps of information needed to determine what training will most directly influence and support the strategic goals of the organization.

Nugget 3

Map it out. Once the strategic plan is in place, the core competencies are defined and the gap analysis is complete, it is time to design the map. Avoid the temptation of the “dart at the target” approach. In the long run, businesses that actually create a plan around business decisions ultimately see greater success and results.

And yes, training is a business decision. Organizations of any size must give careful consideration to the topic. Goals don’t achieve themselves and employees that are not appropriately armed will not get you there.

This map does not have to be complicated. In fact, simple is often better. But writing it down is a powerful fuel to assist in the negotiation of the long road ahead. With the rising cost of gas prices, it is doubtful you get in the car and drive without having at least identified a possible destination. The same is true with assessing training needs. Expand your view of training to be more inclusive of developing the organization and the people in it and you may soon discover that you don’t have to travel to as many destinations or spend as much hard earned money to achieve the same or greater outcome.

Nugget 4

If it comes to hope, cut the rope. Simply hoping that any training is better than no training will not make it so. The idea behind assessing your training needs digs at and uproots the very core of the organization. Without the upfront planning and analysis, there is only guess work as to what training might fix this or that. As an entrepreneur, you can either throw the darts of hope, or you can cut the rope of guess work and begin the process of planning.

Set your budget and your assessment eye on “organization development,” not just training, and watch your return on investment rise.