

Rethinking Training and Development

A typical human resource professional confronts a myriad of challenges daily and chief among them is convincing senior management on the need to invest in staff training and development. This is somewhat surprising because employees cannot be expected to perform their duties without having the required levels of skills and expertise and these skills cannot be acquired in the absence of a sound commitment to human capital development. To surmount this hurdle, it is necessary for the human resource function to go back to the drawing board and rethink its approach to training and development.

A close examination of this problem shows that human resource persons find it relatively difficult to clearly demonstrate the benefits to be derived from training employees. This inability to properly articulate their arguments may cause company executives to be skeptical about investing in human capital development as the costs may seem to outweigh the benefits.

For a clear understanding of the subject matter, it is necessary here to clarify what the terms training and development mean. Training relates to the acquisition of work-relevant skills and competencies and is usually short-term in nature, while development on the other hand, relates to the acquisition of work-relevant experience on a job and is usually long-term in approach. This article places greater emphasis on corporate training and less on development in the workplace, though they are both vital aspects of human capital development.

The Psychology of Learning

In human resource practice, the term training and development is often used interchangeably with human capital development. Training and development can also be interchanged with learning and development (the latter term is now gaining more popularity than the former) and that is where we find the significant relationship between training and learning. Training cannot offer any meaningful value unless learning has actually taken place in the individuals undergoing such training. It is not enough to have positive feedback from trainees as this cannot act as enough evidence that the training has been impactful. The ultimate test of value will be seen in the performance of the trainees on their various jobs and assignments.

From the perspective of psychology, learning is a relatively permanent change in behavior because of an experience. This clearly shows us that unless there is a

modification in outward behavior or performance, learning has not had any tangible impact on the individual. Psychology makes us understand that learning has three main outcomes which are:

- **Knowledge;** facts or information gained in the process of learning and it relates to cognitive development
- **Skills:** proficiency or ability to handle certain tasks or assignments and it relates to psychomotor development
- **Attitude;** a way of feeling or thinking about something that may affect a person's behavior and it relates to affective development

An effective corporate training programme might not offer all three outcomes at once but should provide at least one of them. For instance, an information technology training may focus on psychomotor development while a business ethics training may hone in on affective development. Also, effective training should provide new knowledge and skills and not what the individual has previously known or mastered.

Another Look at Training Needs Assessment and Training Evaluation

Training needs assessment and training evaluation are two vital tools for justifying investment in training and development but sometimes they may not be very useful because of improper application or usage. For many employers and training providers, assessing and evaluating training programmes are mere formalities involving the design, filling and compilation of forms. When this happens, people get involved in training that have little or no impact on the way they work and even when the training is relevant, the tangibility of the training benefits might be very difficult to ascertain.

Assessment forms are not completely useless though, but training needs should also be identified through other means including performance appraisal, manager's feedback and job evaluation. Ideally, both training needs assessment and training evaluation should be done on a periodic basis to ascertain the kind of skills that the employees need for current and future roles and determine whether or not past training has had desirable impact on the employees. This would enhance the ability of the human resource function to prove its worth to top management in the organisation.

Taking A Quantitative Approach

In contemporary management, company executives expect managers to talk figures and demonstrate value from a quantitative viewpoint and human resource managers are not exempted. It may not suffice to present the qualitative benefits of a training programme to senior management without bringing convincing facts and figures to the table. Getting the decision makers in the organisation to be on your side may require practical demonstration of benefits prior to and after the training. The following examples illustrates some of the ways in which the benefits and value of training can be substantiated.

- A training exercise on inventory control might significantly reduce the incidence of missing or lost inventory by 65% in eight months
- An information technology training for accountants might enable them to prepare the books of accounts in less time and with fewer errors
- A project management training for line managers may cut down wastages and enable the company to better manage budgeted costs for its projects

Senior management would most likely invest in human capital development if it delivers both tangible and intangible benefits and if the tangible benefits (that can be measured in numeric terms) are greater than the costs incurred.

Value-Added Human Capital Development

Human resources are undoubtedly the most valuable assets that any organisation has and this corroborates the fact that human resource management is a value-adding function in an organisation. Human capital development will therefore offer real value when the basic learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and attitudes) translate to an observable change in behavior. Such change will ensure that there is a rise in the productivity and performance levels of the employee over time. This change in behavior will also be observed by the employee and by those with whom he/she interacts including customers/clients, superiors, subordinates, managers, colleagues etc. This is where the real value in training and development lies and that is why this critical human resource function needs a rethink.

Have questions, suggestions, opinions on the topic? Jump in by writing in the comments box below.

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