

Running Head: Training Outcomes

Expanding Workforce Development and Training Outcomes: A Case Study

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### --ABSTRACT--

This study examines the impact of a unique blended training program upon expanding training outcomes through the utilization of an internal support program. The focus of the online training system was participant skills in “communicating clearly” and the potentially expanded outcomes resulting from inclusion of an internal support program were focused upon the workforce orientation toward teamwork, loyalty, commitment, and organizational understanding. Perceptions in each area were drawn from three constituencies: participants, supervisors, and training team captains. Results indicate that each group perceived higher skills in communicating clearly and perceived demonstrable levels of teamwork, loyalty, commitment, and understanding. The potential to increase these positive outcomes even further is discussed.

Key Words: communication, teamwork, loyalty, commitment, training, development, organization, leadership, human resource management, outcomes, workforce, employees, improvement

### Expanding Workforce Development and Training Outcomes: A Case Study

Workforce development and training is are essential to successful organizations in modern society as seen in discussions of strategic organizational human resource management (Tichy, 1982), continuous improvement (Tobin 1996), and empowering management and the total quality leadership (Cook 2002). However, the efficacy of training relative to productive outcomes remains a significant question; particularly in the specific instance of training in the area of soft-skills.

If specific types of soft-skill training have no net effect on workforce improvement, defined as a relatively permanent change in behavior, then such training is simply not essential and a waste of organizational resources. On the other hand, should desired improvement occur and added benefits result from an organization's approach to workforce development, a clear mandate to enjoin the development process would be demonstrated. There is a continuing search for definitive definitions of a Return On Investment (ROI) and a demonstration of ROI conducted by such national associations as the American Society for Training and Development and the Human Resource Management association. The traditional soft-skills training model remains general in nature and has not addressed the nature of internal support programs back in the workplace. The purpose of this project was to examine the potential expansion of perceived benefits from a unique approach to workforce soft-skills development that blended the best of online training with an internal support program.

#### Soft-Skills Training

Applied communication is critical to organizational performance and receives developmental attention in most organizations. The training is designed to produce results in the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and abilities that improve employee performance. The soft-

skills that affect one's ability to successfully operate within an organization include 4 sets of workplace competencies: 1) problem-solving and other cognitive skills, 2) oral communication skills, 3) personal qualities and work ethics, and 4) teamwork skills (Leigh, Lee, & Lindquist, 1999). Within these broader categories rest specific skill sets necessary to perform a certain job. For instance, a customer service representative is expected to, at the very least, build rapport, uncover needs, listen, clarify, explain, and manage conversational flow, as well as handle complaints, customers, conflicts, negotiations, and challenging situations. Whatever the job title, when one gets past basic technical competence and attitude, the dominant success factor is directly tied to communication orientation/skill and the reduction of misunderstandings (Evers, F.T. & Rush, J.C., 1996; Zorn & Violanti, 1996). A significant competitive factor for every organization is the continual improvement of soft skills throughout the workforce. In fact, research has indicated that learning organizations, defined by an organization's continual efforts toward employee training, fare better financially as compared to organizations that are not as focused on continued improvement (Ellinger, Ellinger, Yan, & Howton, 2002). Consequently, the company that has more skilled workers simply has greater productivity than their competition. Furthermore, as downsizing has become common, the absolute requirement to reduce costly misunderstandings with customers, vendors, and associates while obtaining higher levels of individual productivity is obvious. However, since in many instances downsizing is the result of a lack of funds, one of the first cost cutting efforts is often to eliminate soft skills training (Gunn, 2003). Moreover, the justification for the elimination of soft skills is often the result of 1) the perception that training has not been successful and 2) the necessity to provide systemic organizational support of the expected behaviors requires internal communication and coordination as well as employment of multiple strategic resource tools to reinforce the

acquisition of soft skills (Cook, 2002). Little has been done to assess the added value that results from systematic internal support for workforce development programs.

### Special Challenges for Soft-Skills Training

There are a number of factors that negatively impact the optimal generation of workforce development in the soft-skill areas; notably: 1) “one-shot” delivery of training 2) lack of application of adult learning principles such as self-selection and self-determination learner-centered approaches 3) lack of consideration of competing priorities of the employees sent to training and 4) lack of internal support for continuing improvement. While technical training may be affected by the aforementioned issues, the perceived utility and ease of metrics measuring ROI tends to cause technical training be more readily received than human skills. Generally speaking, soft-skills training often has an “uphill climb” to receptivity on the part of learners. Soft-skills have too frequently been perceived as offering relatively little value of the organization. The very nomenclature “soft skills,” implies less value.

There are at least three continuing barriers to the general effectiveness of soft- skills training. The first is the trainer’s skill and his/her willingness to deal with the issues of training busy adults. The second is the trainee’s orientation toward training, and the third is the organizational culture and how it supports training in general and continuous improvement of soft skills in particular.

The trainer’s skill may be from the “old school” which involves transmission of information without application or practice. Such “instructor-centered” approaches will not optimize behavioral outcomes, because learners must practice behaviors. Training surpasses awareness and moves toward helping people become more competent (Georges, 1996). Soft skills development should involve a blend of information and opportunities to incorporate

concepts and skills into practice (Greene, 2003; Segrin & Givertz, 2003). Georges (1996) suggests that the best way for trainees to develop skillfulness is to use a two-step process. In step one (about 5-19 % of the time) the focus should be on educating students about the results and skills about which they need to know. Then, step two (90-95% of the time) provides trainees the opportunity to practice with coaching or supervision until the skill is present. One way to add training elements to an educational experience is to allow individuals to bring their own ideas to the event.

Often, the trainee's attitude toward training may be affected by the perceived merit, the competing priorities for his/her time, and willingness to participate in training. The timeless question facing many training professionals is that of mandating training for everyone versus allowing only participant volunteers. In a 2002 study, Naquin and Holton found that over half of the variance in employee motivation to improve work through learning, a concept that includes both the motivation to learn and the motivation to transfer learning to a working environment, was explained by the combination of 1) the tendency to experience positive emotional states, 2) commitment to one's work, and 3) extraversion. Unfortunately, the reality is that many employees do not express a positive orientation toward continual improvement of soft skills, nor do many maintain a positive orientation toward work itself.

Organizations that do not support soft skills training at multiple levels will likely encounter challenges in assuring outcomes and the ROI necessary to assure that soft skills training/improvement continues to be a part of the culture.

#### Blended Learning and Training

Bonk (2001, 2002) indicates that an added motivational value occurs from online learning systems blended with the traditional value found in supportive facilitation that will

produce maximal results. Bodie, Powers, & Fitch-Hauser (2004) and Powers, Bodie and Fitch-Hauser (2004) suggest that a online training model that incorporates face-to-face interaction will prove to produce superior and extended results for participants and organizational leaders. The Concept Keys unique online learning system (Powers, 2003a) promotes such a blended approach through the provision of a facilitator guidebook (Powers, 2003b).

The Concept Keys system is based on the concept of providing small digestible basic Keys and micro-lessons representing a complex topic on a systematic daily basis over an extended timeframe via online Internet technology. Thus, participants are exposed to one basic Key to success every day right in the working environment as part of their normal work pattern. This approach to generating a learning system contains the best of traditional learning tools such as chunking (Miller, 1956; Gobet & Simon, 1996a, b; Servan-Schreiber & Anderson, 1990; Higham, 1997; Koch & Hoffmann, 2000), repetition (Graybiel, 1998; Koch & Hoffmann, 2000) and priming (Ratcliff & McKoon, 1988; Doshier & Rosedale, 1989).

#### Best Practices Combined: Concept Keys

Every soft-skills trainer could use more time with each participant. More time means more potential learning and greater opportunities for actual application. The Concept Keys program delivery system takes only a few minutes each day but extends the learning process right in the participants' work environment to every day over a 2 and ½ month long timeframe without requiring daily trainer attention. However, the inclusion of an internal support program (Powers, 2003b) allows for continual interaction of work teams and trainer facilitated weekly or bi-weekly application sessions that provide an opportunity for enhanced workforce outcomes as a function of the original training program.

The Concept Keys model for internal support places heavy emphasis on participant decision-making, self-selection of critical areas for improvement, self-determination of improvement process, positive facilitator support and guidance, and a continual variety of learning and application activities during regular application sessions. The nature of this internal program supporting workforce development of specific soft-skills allows the actual impact of the online training experience to surpass that of merely improving the participant's skill. The appropriate internal support program also has the opportunity to generate expanded outcomes in the form of more positive attitudes of workers, greater cohesion within work groups and greater understanding across work groups.

### Case Study

An opportunity to work with a non-profit organization focused on developing community youth presented a case study test of outcomes from a blend of the Concept Keys online learning system and a specially designed internal support program. Based upon the preceding review of literature and the restrictions inherent to this case study, the following research questions were examined:

RQ 1: To what extent will employees improve their ability to communicate clearly as a function of online learning and internal support?

RQ 2: To what extent will employee's sense of teamwork improve as a function of online learning and internal support?

RQ 3: To what extent will employee's sense of commitment improve as a function of online learning and internal support?

RQ 4: To what extent will employee's sense of loyalty improve as a function of online learning and internal support?

RQ 5: To what extent will employee's understanding of the organization improve as a function of online learning and internal support?

#### Method

The organization in this study is a non-profit social service agency with the primary mission to provide a safe haven for children to play and learn in neighborhoods where those children might be at risk. The local Association covered seven locations and multiple programs and function with 82 full-time employees and an unspecified number of part-time workers and volunteers. The Association Director met with the Concept Keys team and together they outlined a workforce development effort to enhance employee communication skills, teamwork, loyalty, commitment, and understanding. A Project Leadership Group was formed of representatives from each of seven locations and several on-going programs. After being provided with copies of the internal facilitator manual (Powers, 2003b), the group decided to focus on the Communicating Clearly program to be delivered every work day online to each employee and the internal support program would be very "up-beat" and positively-oriented. The support program included dividing the organization into Facilitator Teams from different locations, programs, and functions within the association of clubs. Facilitators drawn from the Project Leader Group were assigned to each Team. A variety of support activities drawn from the facilitator manual (Powers, 2003b) were used differentially within each group as Facilitators included their Team participants in the decision-making.

The Director of the association distributed an announcement letter to all employees that described the program, the benefits, and encouraged full participation by all. This was followed two-weeks later by an organization-wide Kick-Off session filled with "skits" by Team Facilitators representing common misunderstandings and enjoyable commentary about the new

program. A week later, the program distribution of Keys commenced. The plan was to have Team meetings every week or every other week depending upon emerging circumstances, to keep the meetings very enjoyable, and to rotate meeting locations. The content of the support meetings included activities selected by participants representative of the Keys (e.g. skits, poetry, song-writing, etc.), and discussion of the weekly Keys directed toward application opportunities (best Keys, worst Keys, etc.). Comments during meetings of the Facilitators indicated that teams met on an irregular basis, some more than others as a function of availability and inclination. Employees attended relatively consistently. Some Facilitators were clearly more engaged with employee improvement than others. An organizational newsletter was created and distributed via internal mail. And, a concluding congratulatory session was held within an all-employee meeting where some Teams produced skits representing their approach, experiences, and Facilitator.

#### Procedures

The researchers were not in a position to intervene during the program. Organizational circumstances limited the ability to directly observe employees and/or generate data reflecting their communication skills and attitudes prior to the program. Thus, the data generated was limited to the collection of perceptions of the research interests held by the three groups of constituents (employees, Facilitators, and Supervisors) following completion of the program.

At the congratulatory meeting, surveys were distributed. The surveys were to be returned later by sending them to the executive secretary's mailbox via the internal mail system. Slightly different survey questions were designed for each of the three groups.

Employees were asked to indicate how often they communicated clearly with their various constituencies (e.g. co-workers, supervisor, youth, parents, volunteers, etc) prior to and

following the special program. A five-point, Likert-type scale was used ranging from Never to Always. In a similar before/after model and using the same scale, employees were asked to indicate how frequently they felt to be a part of the team, loyal toward the club, committed to the club, and understood the organization.

Facilitators were asked the number of employees on their Team, how many improved in communicating clearly, and how many team members improved in a sense of teamwork, loyalty, commitment, and understanding.

Supervisors were asked how many employees report directly to them, how many communicated clearly before the project and following the project, and over the course of the project how many employees developed a greater sense of teamwork, loyalty, commitment, and understanding.

### Results

Useable surveys were returned from 42 general employees, 5 Team Captains and 14 Supervisors. Ten unusable surveys were returned either blank or with only 1 or 2 question responses. Where appropriate, difference scores between prior and after ratings were used to calculate improvement. The data from Facilitators and Supervisors were collapsed to represent changes across the entire organization. All data were then converted into percentages reflecting workforce improvement in the areas associated with the five Research Questions. The following results indicating improvement by each group were obtained:

Table 1

## Mean Group Perceptions of Improvement

<b>VARIABLE</b>	<b>EMPLOYEES</b>	<b>TEAM CAPTAINS</b>	<b>SUPERVISORS</b>
Communication Skill Improvement	51%	45%	15%
Improvement in Teamwork	68%	56%	76%
Improvement in Loyalty	48%	46%	61%
Improved Commitment	52 %	46%	63%
Improved Organizational Understanding	60%	62%	70%

Question One explored the perceptions of communication skill improvement with 51% of the employees who returned surveys indicating they had improved in communicating clearly with at least one constituency. Facilitators reported that 45% of the employees on their teams improved. Supervisor's perceptions were dramatically lower with the indication that only 15% of their employees actually improved in communicating clearly.

Question Two explored employee sense of teamwork with a resounding 68% of the employees perceiving their orientation toward teamwork to have improved. Facilitators perceived 56% and the Supervisors perceived 76% to have an improved teamwork orientation.

Question Three examined the employee improvement in loyalty with 48% of the employees perceived their sense of loyalty to the organization to have improved. Facilitators

perceived 46% and the Supervisors felt that as much as 61% of the employees experienced an increase in organizational loyalty.

Question Four dealt with employee sense of commitment and yielded improvement as seen by the employees of 52%, by Facilitators of 46%, and by their Supervisors of 63%.

Question Five reflected employee improvement in organizational understanding with 60% of the employees feeling they improved in this area, 62% of the Facilitators and 70% of the Supervisors were in general agreement.

### Discussion

Interestingly, a number of the respondents displayed quite high scores prior to the project and correspondingly high scores afterwards in such a fashion as to indicate no improvement at all. This appeared to reflect some high degree of apprehension that the data were not being held in complete confidentiality. Casual conversations with the Facilitators and Supervisors further indicated a cultural perception of reluctance to communicate negatively about aspects of performance. A number of members of the workforce apparently felt they would be held responsible if they were not appropriately effective communicators etc. prior to the program.

In one sense, the results are disappointing, as the culture of the organization may have produced an orientation toward providing less than honest and accurate responses. In addition, the supervisors' low rating of employee communication skill improvement shows at least from line management's perspective the employee communication skills did not improve as dramatically as indicated by other groups.

Nevertheless, the organization successfully engaged in an application of this innovative blended training approach and the leadership perceived the project to have been one of value.

This certainly allows for increased likelihood of future soft skills interventions. The strategic implementation would likely require more involvement at middle and higher levels.

There are implications for the value of systemic internal support for soft skills improvement. As Cook (2002) noted, management and human resource managers must fully engage the culture through the use of communication and support mechanisms to maximize results. Obviously if the conjecture is correct, pre-training information will only be accurate if the organization is not feared as a sanctioning body and this is a dominant theme in most organizational research.

Increased improvement may have occurred with greater supervisory support and, in particular, with greater support and demonstration by the most senior officials of the importance of communicating clearly with the various constituencies. That lesson is key to all workforce development efforts, particularly those with a top-down leadership style.

However, the results do indicate some level of improvement in all categories. Future research comparing traditional training methods with alternative online training blended with different support models seems warranted. The researchers are confident that without the support program there would have been absolutely minimal improvement across the workforce. That theme appears to be evident in a variety of organizational situations and merits further attention and exploration.

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