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Applied Industrial Training Pays Off
Investment in the Classroom Unleashes Creativity in the Field
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Maintenance Technology/June 1999

Industrial companies in the United States spend an estimated \$50 billion annually on training workers, approaching the amount spent on public education each year. Are companies getting an appropriate return on this huge investment? Is there a significant payoff on the bottom-line? If not, why not? These are questions that must be asked and answered.

There is no doubt that, as new technologies continue to come into the workplace, the skills and knowledge required of employees are increasing at a rapid rate. Training to develop higher intellectual and technical skills among workers is no longer a luxury; it is essential for corporate survival. On that basis alone, employee training should be the best investment any company can make. Sadly, that is not always the case.

As a consulting instructor, I have visited hundreds of industrial facilities in this country and abroad. Too often, I find that, although management has endorsed the concept of technical training, the new knowledge and skills gained by employees in the classroom are packed away with the workbooks when they return to the field.

Without this carry-over of classroom training into the daily work environment, the return on the company's investment does not meet management's expectations. Certainly, the bottom-line payoff is not what it can or should be.

Why Training Fails

There are several reasons why this situation occurs repeatedly, but two in particular stand out.

First, managers too quickly embrace what I call "buzz word training". Buzz words pervade the workplace today. Whether it is safety, quality, reliability, RCM, RCA, Human Factors, Human Performance or some other trend; the inclination is to say, "Aha! That's the answer to our problems". Training programs ensue without clear objectives and without a thorough analysis of what will be required to bring knowledge out of the classroom and into the field.

A second major reason that training often fails to produce quantifiable results in the field is that new proactive skills are brought into an existing environment that is essentially reactive. This is one of the most damaging paradigms of training. The knowledge and expertise to truly affect change is provided in the classroom, but outdated processes and systems do not support employee's efforts to implement new ideas and new skills in the workplace. Worse yet, they often create barriers that prevent any real change from occurring.

Once out of the classroom, workers find it is business as usual on the plant floor or in the field. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising employees become at best, skeptical of training and, at worst, cynical. It is seen merely as management's latest therapeutic maneuver or an attempt to show movement and activity in the name of the newest buzz word.

When the purpose of training is ambiguous and when there is no ongoing process to support implementation of new skills and techniques in the field, the result is frustrated workers and a disappointing return on management's investment.

Integrating Skills

Based on my experience, observations, and conversations with hundreds of students, there are five primary steps that must be taken to move classroom training into the mainstream of facility operations and to integrate newly learned skills into the company's way of doing business:

- Clearly define training objectives and expectations.
- Establish training processes rather than programs.
- Create a proactive work environment.
- Provide “champions” to give support and encouragement.
- Reward and recognize workers' efforts and successes.

Objectives and Expectations

The old adage about thinking before acting, certainly applies to employee training. Before committing time and money to the classroom, clearly define both the company's objectives for the training and what it expects from students as an outcome. Make sure everyone understands these objectives and expectations.

Let students know they will be accountable for producing certain results within a specified timeframe. When employees know why they are going into training and what the company expects from it, they are more likely to take an active role.

Of course, understanding is a two-way street. It is essential that management really knows what the student workers are learning and why. For example, I frequently conduct seminars and workshops in root cause analysis (RCA). Among the first questions students ask is, “Has our management seen this class?” More often than not, the answer is ‘No’. When management does not understand the focus and purpose of the training content, it may assume that workers are learning to conduct RCA faster when, in fact, the students are being taught to perform the process more accurately and not more quickly.

There is a conflict of expectations that students sense immediately. Their enthusiasm wanes and the passive “donuts and coffee” mentality sets in – the attitude that training is little more than a chance for free donuts, a nice lunch, and a break from the work routine.

Processes versus Programs

It may seem pedantic to quibble about words, but the difference between establishing a training process for the company and conducting training programs is immense. Generally, programs have defined beginnings and ends. Employees have grown accustomed to training programs and know that, as surely as one begins, it will come to an end sooner or later. By definition, programs are completed within a specified time.

On the other hand, a process is systemic, organic, and continuous. Processes become part of the environment, the corporate culture, the way business is conducted and work is performed. By viewing training as a process, the potential to transfer skills and knowledge from the class to the field is increased many fold. New ideas and new approaches become integrated into the daily work routine. The change is real and lasting.

A Proactive Environment

Classroom training alone will not produce results in the field, however good it is. Management must provide an infrastructure and a work environment to support its implementation. In class, students are taught proactive concepts which they are expected to apply in their jobs. Reality sets in when they return to the reactive

environment prevalent in many facilities today. Outmoded systems, restrictive procedures, and firefighting mentalities strangle creative thinking and the application of new techniques.

The changes in systems and procedures required to implement new skills in the field should be considered when training objectives and expectations are established. At a minimum, workers must be given the time to apply what they have learned. Administrative and procedural barriers should be removed and existing systems should be modified to support workers' efforts to affect change.

RCA training is a good example. In class, students are taught an analytical approach to problem solving. To implement these techniques in the field requires time, support systems, and a commitment to performing better, not faster. When students return to a reactive environment in which "fix it" rather than "solve it" is the prevailing mindset, the training payoff is lost for both workers and the company.

Need for Champions

Even workers who truly want to apply their new training often are hesitant to do so because of the uncertainty of success. They are venturing into new territory and the outcome is unknown. There is risk. Their credibility, perhaps even their jobs, are on the line.

This is the perfect opportunity to provide students with an in-house resource to hold their hands on their first attempt, to ensure they are successful in their first effort. They need a champion – a person who will oversee the implementation of the training by the students and assist them in any way possible. This includes removing any roadblocks they may encounter on their way to success. They may be implementing new technology that will not be understood by their fellow workers or by management. Resistance to change can be formidable. The champion must step in to overcome these hurdles and allow the implementation to progress.

When the champion and the students work together, they will produce what I call trophies – models of success that serve as a standard for the rest of organization. Once several trophies have been obtained, these successes and the workers responsible for them should be marketed internally. This will gain the necessary acceptance from the rest of the organization. It truly can be a situation in which success breeds more success as others adopt and practice the new techniques.

Rewards and Recognition

Those who adopt the desired behavior and who strive to succeed in new skills must be rewarded and recognized. Rewards and recognition are distinctly different and both should be employed to further the implementation of training in the field.

Rewards do not have to be financial incentives. Trips, tickets to sporting events, dinners, movies or other items of value to the individual work well as rewards. If financial rewards are given, it is best that they be uniform and based on positive effort rather than on the impact of a particular recommendation. The primary goal of rewards, at least in the short-term, is to encourage adoption of new ways of thinking and working.

Recognition is directed toward satisfying the emotional needs of employees to be known and appreciated for their positive behaviors. Studies have shown that recognition by peers and management for good work is as important as financial awards.

There are many ways to give recognition to those who have successfully transferred classroom training into the workplace. For example:

- Permit them to make a presentation on their success to management, peers and even trade conferences.
- Put their names on reports in which they had input.
- Encourage them to write an article in the company newsletter or for the company website.
- Publish success stories with credit in technical magazines, on in-house intranets.
- Give personal letters of commendation from management for positive achievements.
- Schedule lunches or dinners in their honor with their families and top management.

The Real Payoff

If the ultimate purpose of training is change and growth, then real progress is being made when employees begin to question the status quo. When they ask, “why do we do it this way and how can we do it better,” there is a clear indication that they are looking for better and more productive ways to solve problems and achieve success.

It is this unleashing of creativity in the field that produces the real payoff for the investment in training. The gains from tapping the creative potential of the work force are phenomenal.

In recent years, companies have turned to downsizing, re-engineering, and a host of other methods to increase profit and remain competitive in the new world market. They have all proved flawed in one way or another. It is time organizations realized the potential payoff to be gained, by optimizing production and minimizing costs through a well-trained, creative thinking, enthusiastic work force, is far greater than size reductions or the latest buzz word theory of management

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