

SIMPLE TRAINING – STEPS YOUR BUSINESS CAN TAKE TODAY

Working with our clients across many industries, one of their most common perceptions is that the source of their challenges lies in an under skilled workforce. We hear comments like, “*we don’t have the skills in the team right now,*” or “*we have one or two top performers that carry the team.*”

More striking than our clients’ perceptions that their workforce is under-skilled is their own difficulties in initiating a fast moving, practical training plan. While Trident never claims to be an HR consultancy or have core competencies in skill development, we have developed a method to help our clients more clearly identify their skill gaps and begin closing those gaps – fast.

Before outlining the steps we work through with our clients to kick-start a training program, we should also note that the most common barrier our clients face is the idea that the skills gaps are insurmountable, or will require years of effort and a revolutionized hiring process to overcome.

In short, not only do we disagree, but we think you can start closing the gaps today.

First - Create a Skills Matrix

The first step is to stop thinking of “skills” and begin thinking about what your business needs – people to complete activities effectively. Skills are the underlying ability, but if you think about the activities that need to be performed, it is easier to identify weaknesses that can be addressed. For example, the general “customer service skills” does not lend to specific activities required by the business, but “explain product features to customers over the phone” pinpoints a specific piece of “customer service skills.”

Once you have created a list of activities for a team, match them in a matrix layout with all of the employees who are on the team. Then quickly evaluate each employee and their capability in completing each activity. Best practices use the following scale:

3 = expert,

2 = capable,

1 = incapable,

and [blank] = Not Applicable.

Many managers get stuck here, unwilling or hesitant to evaluate employees without an objective measure. At this stage it is important to remember that this tool can remain confidential and is going to be used to create a training plan, not assess compensation or other sensitive topics. A manager should be able to fill out the matrix by their own subjective measure very quickly. Here is an example illustrating a filled out Skills Matrix for a Customer Service department:

CUSTOMER SERVICE TEAM - SKILLS MATRIX												
EMPLOYEE	Explain "Widget" Features & Benefits	Identify Customer Objections	Upsell Customer to "Deluxe Widget"	Upsell Customer on "Widget Warranty"	Gather Customer Information	Enter Order Information	Explain Order Delivery To Customer	Train Customer on "Widget" Installation	Troubleshoot "Widget" Problems	Explain Problem Solution to Customer	EMPLOYEE BREADTH AVG	TRAINING PLAN
Rob - CS Manager	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	2	2	2	2.6	
Betty - CS Supervisor	3	2	3	2	3	3	2	1	1	2	2.2	
Paul - CS Rep	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	3	3	3	2.0	
Lisa - CS Rep	3	1	2	2	3	3	3	2	1	1	2.1	
Tim - CS Rep	2	3	2	1	2	3	2	1	2	2	2.0	
Kristine - CS Rep	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	1.7	
Steve - CS Rep	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.2	
Anne - Sales Manager	3	3	3	3	2	1	1	2	1	1	2.0	
Ryan - Widget Engineer								3	3	3	3.0	
ACTIVITY DEPTH AVG	2.4	2.1	2.1	1.7	2.1	2.0	1.7	1.8	1.6	1.8	2.0	

Second – Identify Gaps

Focusing on activities rather than nebulous skills, and using this simple ranking scale gives you an easy way to identify specific activity gaps. In the simplest approach, take a quick look at the averages to identify the weakest employee breadth averages or the weakest activity depth averages.

Often though, our clients quickly recognize that not all activities are equally important. Going back to the example, perhaps failures in entering customer information into Order System has led to a rash of recent complaints and is more critical than upsell customer on "Widget Warranty." Or looking at it on the employee side, Paul was hired to quickly become a CS Supervisor and may be more critical of a training need than the lower average scored Steve.

In any situation, once the skills matrix is filled out, the manager should create a training priority list, clearly identifying specific employees will be trained on specific activities.

Third – Identify Gap Experts

Another common barrier that our clients often face is the idea that training must be performed in a structured class-room setting or via corporate human resources training materials. While there are obvious benefits to the focus and clarity available in these methods, we assert that there are faster more flexible ways too.

For example, after identifying training priorities, identify experts at the activities near the top of the priority list. Keep in mind that the business is all one team, and resources from outside the immediate department may be the best experts (as can be seen in the example provided where the engineer and sales manager are included in the skills matrix despite not being explicitly in the Customer Service team). Usually though, when keeping an activity based perspective, Managers and Supervisors have the capabilities for most weaknesses.

Fourth – Commit to Simple Training

Here is the breakthrough step for most businesses.

Once employees and activities have been quickly assessed and gaps and experts identified, make a practical plan to have the experts work with to close the gaps every single day.

Rather than trying to arrange for an outside expert to come in and provide the whole team with a 2 day training seminar at the corporate training facility, have the manager train one employee tomorrow for 15 minutes. Once you break the mold of training being a team-wide event planned weeks in advance, many formats will begin to come forward. Here are a few examples we have implemented recently with our clients:

- **Theme days** – where the Manager trains the whole team for 10 minutes each day first thing in the morning. Each Monday is Activity 1, Tuesday is Activity 2, etc.
- **Manager daily plan** – where the Manager takes sets aside 15 minutes in the morning and 15 minutes in the afternoon and checks off the top two training priorities each day.
- **Activity just-in-time** – where specific employee(s) are asked to come to the manager (expert) any time they encounter a need to perform a specific activity and they work through it together.

The principle at work here is that skill weaknesses follow an 80/20 rule. That is, 80% of problems due to skill weaknesses are created by 20% or activities or 20%

of employees. By addressing those 20% on a very regular basis, the problems will go down quickly.

Finally – Follow Up / Re-Plan

The final step is entirely for the purpose of continuing the effectiveness of the simple training method.

After an initial evaluation of activities and capabilities and practical pairings of experts and gaps, the gaps will shift to new activities and employees. Therefore, best practices include scheduling a regular reversion back to step one where activities and employees are revised and reevaluated (theoretically, the training priorities have moved from 1s and 2s to 3s).

Often in this step, our clients realize the value in sharing the skills matrix openly with their employees. This tactic when implemented properly can motivate employees to self-improve by alerting them that the business values the performance of certain activities. Further it can motivate employees to actively seek out training or development opportunities.

Summary

Employee skills are commonly a perceived weakness in businesses, and training programs – even in world class businesses – can be slow and impractical. However managers of teams or organizations of any size can create their own practical training plans quickly by considering specific activities, prioritizing gaps, pairing gaps to experts, and breaking the mold of typical business training in favor of small progress every day.