

All Training Isn't Basic Training!

It's been a problem for years — training that essentially starts at the bottom and stays there. It's a one-size fits all approach.

Perhaps the most common example is the sales trainer who walks into a room full of strangers, knowing that the experience range is from a few months to many years. He spends a day or two providing a series of by-the-numbers concepts along with some role-playing and discussion.¹ The training is like the Biblical high priest Melchizedek who suddenly appears, coming from nowhere and going nowhere.

For the most part, training provides the concepts and vocabulary for a subject area. The concepts provide a way to deal with a situation — for instance, a four-step method for dealing with angry or dissatisfied customers or a three-step process for presenting product features. The purpose of training is to teach an effective, but limited set of responses to a situation.

The problem is that for many of the areas in which we practice training is the first and only step. What is missing is “development,” promoting the ability to go beyond the prescriptions and develop new and original solutions.

It's been a problem for years — and with the advent of technology-based training, it's becoming a bigger problem. Most Internet-based training, for instance, is designed to train at a very basic level. On the Internet, you can learn to:

- Wire a three-way switch.
- Create a code module in Access.

¹ Lest someone think that this is an overly harsh description, I should mention that I do exactly this and will continue to so long as companies insist on training this way.

- Make a bomb.

All of these subjects are suitable for basic training. Some of them are more or less difficult and some are more or less socially acceptable, but they are all prescriptive, by the numbers, concept and vocabulary. They are not helpful at all if you need to:

- Design lighting for your home.
- Conceptualize a database.
- Determine who or what should be bombed.

These tasks require using the concepts and vocabulary of the basic training plus the ability to incorporate other information, make value judgments and— in some cases — arrive at answers beyond what has been taught.

The question becomes what is required to equip employees to go beyond ‘by the numbers’ approaches and combine the skills and knowledge taught with their work and life experiences to arrive at new and better solutions. In other words, how do we get beyond “basic” training?

The first step is to broaden our view of the positions. For the most part, the competencies for an entry-level person in any position are very similar (or exactly the same) to those for a much more experienced person. For instance, the day a warehouse person reports to work, he or she is expected to learn how to put away stock, how to receive stock, and how to pick stock. Two years later that same warehouse person is expected to know the same things and not much more.

This may be the reason that some companies have found that the most effective training is not done by the company, but in spite of it. John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid report in *The Social Life of Information* that problem solving was done by Xerox technicians at breakfasts before they began their calls for the day. Because the formal

training did not prepare them for what they found in the field, they had created an informal information network where they used their experience to devise and publish solutions.

The people working in the real world had discovered that the problems they were being asked to solve today were not solved by textbook approaches. Perhaps we, as managers responsible for training, should recognize the same thing and design training to equip every employee to grow in his or her job. For most positions, this involves a three-level training hierarchy.

The first level is the basic training that we currently have. Entry-level employees must understand the basic concepts and have a grasp of the vocabulary used to discuss those concepts. This training also equips the employee to respond in an approved manner to specific situations.

The second level assumes that the employee has a grasp of the basic concepts and vocabulary. The training is scenario-based, asking the participants to use what they know from their previous training and their experience to develop responses to real-world situations. The responses are judged not against the trainer's preconceptions, but in terms of their effectiveness.

The third level is still broader, typically case-based. Here the problems are not defined, only the objectives. Participants, usually working in groups, are given a substantial body of data, some of which is relevant to the case.

That's a very brief description of the training design. There is another, equally important attribute: positioning.

One of the greatest problems that an independent training consultant has is how the training is positioned to the participants. In most cases it's a flat statement that training will be conducted on a subject, and that you (the participant) will be there. In one instance, a sales force was told that the new compensation plan did not include travel expenses, and in almost the same breath that

the scheduled sales training was mandatory. "Mandatory" was in bold capital letters, the better to completely infuriate the participants.

Common sense, it seems, would dictate that — at the very least — the training be positioned as important to the personal success of the participants. Beyond that, however, the more advanced training should be positioned as a reward for outstanding performance at the previous level.

The following is a brief example of how this might work in developing a sales force for a distributor. It assumes a relatively large sales force in a highly competitive and rapidly changing market.

SALES 101: This series of training courses deals the products carried by the distributor, customer demographics and expectations, and basic sales skills. (Basic sales skills include feature/benefit presentations, questioning skills, recovering after product and/or service failures, prospecting, and closing. Additionally, this level might include basic territory management concepts.) The overall objectives of this training are to prepare the new salesperson to make productive sales calls, to be able to identify a qualified prospect, and to present the product and the company effectively.

SALES 201: Once the salesperson has demonstrated mastery of the basic concepts and assuming that management sees a future for the salesperson in the company, he or she is enrolled in the intermediate training course. Here the participants develop responses to scenarios that do not lend themselves to easy or cookbook answers. For instance, given a large, potentially profitable account with a high need for delivery dependability in an equally high competitive environment, how does the company position itself to be the preferred vendor and at the same time maintain its margins.

In this case the statement of the problem eliminates the traditional, easy answer: stock more product. The participants must search for other solutions. (For those

interested in such problems, participant solutions have included various types of vendor-managed inventory, mobile branches, and distributor-customer committees charged with improving purchasing and planning.) The solution itself is not so important as whether it meets the requirements of the problem. In this case there were three: satisfy the customer's high dependability requirements, position the company above the competition, and maintain margins.

SALES 301: For the best and brightest of the sales force, there is the company's version of the War College. At this level, the questions are broad, and the answers should – if implemented – make major changes in the company. The participants are given a case, including all of the necessary background data, and asked to prepare a well-documented analysis and conclusions. The case, for instance, might ask what – given the trends in purchasing, channel confusion, transportation and logistics – the company should aim for in its market model five years out. The question is not what we should do today (even if it is new), but what will serve us in the future.

The same hierarchical model could be used for any area of any business where we contend that our employees are “knowledge workers.” And it can be done as technology-based training, using the standard Internet concept-question model for the basic training, facilitated courses via the Internet for the intermediate level, and case-based training using geographically dispersed groups for the advanced level.

Years ago some of us were told that a liberal arts education was valuable because it “taught us to think.” The implication was that a technical education such as engineering didn't teach us to think; it taught the engineer to apply existing answers to existing problems. Without getting into whether either the statement or the implied statement was ever actually true, we can see where we have taken the “engineering” approach to the bulk of our training today.

The results are that we have failed to broaden and enrich our positions, resulting in a higher turnover of good people, and that instead of building on multiple years of experience, we recreate the same experience over and over while the real world leaves us behind.

Written by Chuck Holmes, president of Corporate Strategies, Inc. for ASTD – Atlanta.