WORKPLACE DEVELOPMENT:

It's Too Important Not To Get This Right

by Laurence Claus, NNi Training and Consulting, Inc.

In recent years, the universal chorus of manufacturers across the country seems to be how they are going to recruit new members to their team to keep up with new openings and backfill the exodus of an older workforce that is quickly retiring. To their chagrin, they have learned that even if they have a good solution to this first challenge, other, often more imposing challenges quickly follow suit. Once they have new team members aboard, they find themselves challenged to bridge an ever-widening skills gap. As a result, workplace development in the form of education and training has become increasingly more important.

Eight years ago, I found myself making a career shift after 26 years serving in engineering, business development, and executive management roles with a Midwestern fastener manufacturer. Gone were all the daily concerns associated with such roles to be replaced by a growing passion to help educate both existing and upcoming individuals about fasteners and the fastener industry. My schedule increasingly added new opportunities and new training sessions. It has allowed me to meet and interact with many great individuals and organizations and to observe and formulate impressions on many things important to our industry. I would like to share four observations regarding workplace development and training that have emerged from these opportunities. I hope that reflecting on these observations relative to your organization might allow you, the reader, a means to assess what your organization is doing well and what areas might stand a little improvement.

Culture

Is workforce development part of your company culture? I once heard character defined as what we do when we think no one else is looking. Company culture is sort of like that. We often say that our company culture is this or that, but the reality is that our company culture is defined by the things the company values and the collective actions it takes in response to those values. To illustrate this, my parents were educators. My father was a college physics professor, and my mother a math and science teacher. They valued education, intellectual pursuits, and knowledge. They raised children within this context to do the same, so that going to college, not skipping school, honoring teachers, etc. were all philosophies and traits ingrained in our normal thinking and behavior.

I imagine that if I asked every one of the clients I work with whether their company culture valued workplace development, training, and education, I would receive a resounding, "of course, why do you think you are here doing this training session?" Sponsoring training and development activities, however, is not necessarily an indicator that such activities are truly valued by the organization. A couple of years ago, I was conducting training at two clients within a couple of days of one another. The first was with a brand new client. I did not know what to expect and was shocked when the president arrived about 20 minutes before my scheduled start. He engaged me in conversation about the training and what his team could expect to learn that day. I was thrilled when he asked if he could kick things off and impressed when he stood in front of his team and spent 10 minutes explaining to them why the training they were about to receive was important to the company and to them. He continued to surprise me when he concluded, found a seat in the front row, sat down, and participated in the session.

Now I contrast this with my experience a few days later. I had been engaged to conduct training for all of this company's machine operators. The training would be in multiple sessions over the course of the entire day. To my disappointment, I did not have a single company leader show up to explain to their team why they were in this training and how it would benefit them and the company. Although I filled in these gaps,

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I could not help but feel sad that this company missed an opportunity to express the importance of education and development to their manufacturing team (a large percentage of their entire workforce). I'm sure they would have told me that they highly valued training and developing their team, but they didn't show it that day, for which I could argue, it was simply a reflection that they do not possess a company culture that values training.

Some of the self-assessing questions you might ask to determine how strongly your company culture values training and development include:

- What individuals routinely receive training in your company: managers, front office personnel, machine operators? Is there any group that receives the majority of the attention? Is there any group that receives none at all?
- Do managers and leaders routinely seek out education about their products or markets, or are they "too busy," "too knowledgeable," or "too important" to be bothered with training?
- Is there encouragement to receive training and education in areas that are not directly related to the role an individual is in? For example, would it be common to encourage an engineer to receive accounting or sales education? Are life skills trainings unrelated to the technical aspects of the job encouraged?
- Do leaders show up and kick-off training? (This is a simple and very effective way to either reinforce a strong company cultural bias or to start developing new ones.)
- Does your company offer educational opportunities just for the sake of team member improvement? The internet shoe and clothes retailer, Zappos, provides opportunities and financial incentives for any interested team member to read books from a library in their company headquarters and present what they learned from reading it to interested colleagues.
- And perhaps a simple litmus test: Is it considered a "bother" or "hardship" to stop production and let machine operators attend training? (If the answer is "yes," training and education are not strongly valued in the company culture.)

MICHAEL PORTER, A HARVARD PROFESSOR WHO IS GENERALLY CONSIDERED TO BE ONE OF THE LEADING EXPERTS IN COMPETITIVE STRATEGY, BOILS DOWN THE ESSENCE OF STRATEGY IN THIS STATEMENT: "STRATEGY IS ABOUT SETTING YOURSELF APART FROM THE COMPETITION. IT'S NOT A MATTER OF BEING BETTER AT WHAT YOU DO—IT'S A MATTER OF BEING DIFFERENT AT WHAT YOU DO." THIS CONCISE STATEMENT BY PORTER HELPS LAY IT OUT FOR US; IT'S NOT ABOUT BEING BETTER BUT ABOUT BEING DIFFERENT.

If you are not practicing most of these things in your company, it is probably a sign that personnel development and training are probably not highly valued in your organization. Most companies miss the mark here, and it is really the unique company that has a very strong company cultural bias to workplace development, education, and training. Sadly, most companies practice what a U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics survey found on training. The survey found that companies with fewer than 100 employees gave only 12 minutes to manager training every six months. Organizations with 100–500 provided only six minutes.

Strategy

Is workforce development considered a strategic initiative? Although the emphasis on strategic planning that many companies engaged in during the late 1990s and early 2000s has widely diminished, proactive companies are still very intentional about formulating competitive strategy. There are pages and pages of experts informing us about what strategy is and how to put together plans. Michael Porter, a Harvard professor who is generally considered to be one of the leading experts in this area, boils down the essence of strategy in this statement: "Strategy is about setting yourself apart from the competition. It's not a matter of being better at what you do—it's a matter of being different at what you do." This concise statement by Porter helps lay it out for us; it's not about being better but about being different.

To this end, some questions that you might use to self-assess your company might include:

- Is workforce development considered to be strategic to your company? Is it formally or informally part of your Strategic Plan?
- Do you have a formal plan for training that includes every team member?
- Are all members of your team aware of what the company development plan is for them? How about for the overall company? Can they explain why workforce development activities are important?
- Does your company believe that workforce development activities can make you more productive? Competitive?
- Do you seek to understand what your competitors are doing relative to training and try to be different?

A study by the Association for Talent Development found that companies with a culture for training and formal training activities had 218% higher income per employee and 24% higher profit margin than those that did not. Workforce development and training is very strategic and will continue to be in years to come, especially for organizations where a large percentage of the workforce is soon to age out.

Effective Training

A recent study declared that the total loss to business from ineffective training is $13,500,000 per year per 1,000 employees. That is a whopping $13,500 a year loss for every employee because they are not trained effectively enough.

I often have this conversation with my clients prior to conducting training for them. Different situations at different companies mean that a one-size-fits-all training

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approach rarely is successful. I attempt, whenever and wherever possible, to semi-customize training materials that are relevant to my individual clients. In other words, I try to incorporate their actual examples, prints, images, processes, and procedures in my training materials. Additionally, I have learned that there may be a stark difference between audiences. Machine operators generally respond to training in different ways than a group of the company's engineers and quality technicians will. Training has to be tailored to the audience to be most effective.

I often get the question about how I know if my training is effective. Sadly, I usually cannot provide anything but a vague answer here, not because I am withholding information but rather because this is information companies must define and tease out of their own metrics. I can, however, share feedback I receive about how the training was received either through evaluations or comments made to me. I am always overjoyed when a participant, especially a machine operator, comes up to me after a training session and tells me that they learned a lot. However, definitive, hard data has to come from the company. Unfortunately, the data may be hard to get, as it may be difficult, especially in the short term, to point to changes in the company performance metrics and say that "this" or "that" improvement was the result of a specific training session.

Some good self-assessment questions include:

- Have you established methods to monitor the effectiveness of training? This might include improvements in companywide trends such as reduction in scrap, downtime, quality spills, etc., improvements in departmental performance, or specific performance improvements in targeted individuals following training activities.
- Are you sensitive to the different needs of individuals and groups in the organization?
  - Is machine operator training separate and different from front office training?
  - If English is not the primary language of your workforce, is training conducted or training materials translated into your team's native languages?
  - Do you provide snacks? (It is amazing how the presence of a couple of simple drink and snack choices can really help set a positive tone for a training session. This is especially true for machine operator training, I believe, because it is an unexpected expression of how much you care for them and value their contribution to your company.
- Are team members encouraged or asked to make a report to their colleagues on what they learned from their training?
- Is your organization actively seeking to make trainers of the trainees?

Sadly, a survey of HR managers showed that only 38% believe that their learning programs meet their learner's needs. Consider that finding for a second: It says that almost two-thirds of all HR managers (62%) believe they are putting on ineffective learning programs. Doing a lot of training for the sake of doing it is generally a poor plan. This is truly one of those areas where quality trumps quantity. Every company should be assessing their workforce development and training programs and seeking to find ways to continue to improve them.

On-the-Job-Training (OTJT)

Most fastener manufacturers here in the U.S. have few options in developing necessary competencies for their skilled workers outside of the workplace. There are roles that are notable exceptions, but by-and-large, skilled workers in the fastener industry gain those skills on the job. Since there are limited or no outside options, companies are realizing that they must have their own internal OTJT.

Since OTJT is a necessity, companies must give serious thought to how they are going to structure such activities. Will they be a mix of classroom skills and practical hands-on, or simply one or the other? Considerable thought should be given to who the trainer or trainers will be. All too often, companies appoint the "old guy" (the one with the longest tenure or most experience) as the trainer. Although this may work out, it is not guaranteed. Sometimes the most experienced guy is an excellent operator and indispensable asset but is a lousy trainer or has a difficult personality. In either case, new team members under this individual's care become frustrated or simply do not pick up the necessary skills.

Some self-assessment questions here include:

- Does the OTJT provide a good balance of classroom and practical skill development?
- Are the trainers the best choices? (Many organizations have found that pairing a new, young team member with another young team member that has been onboard for at least several years makes a better pairing than with an older, longer tenured team member.)
- Do you have and can you effectively use the internet or online sources?
- Can the trainee use the online sources from home?
- Is there a dedicated, separate training cell/machine? (Without dedicated equipment, hands-on training becomes a low priority and is usually poorly executed.)
- Do you mix soft skill training with practical skills?
- How do you measure growth of individuals and the effectiveness of the training they are receiving?
- Do you utilize outside trainers or send individuals for outside training?

For many organizations OTJT is really challenging. Often companies are simply not large enough to be able to cover the costs and resources associated with conducting a really good OTJT program. However, this is one of those activities that you cannot afford to NOT do well.

Conclusion

These are but four observations I have made that seem to universally apply across the fastener industry. They are all important, but I believe that fostering a company culture that values workplace development and training is the most important. I say this because I believe it is likely that the items identified in the other observations will fall into place for organizations where education and workplace development are truly part of the culture. So if your company is not quite there yet, don't despair, but keep working to make this part of your culture. It is too important not to. ■