The Training Investment

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Training is the best investment both managers and employees can make in a work unit. It is the basis of quality control, high productivity, and excellent service. It engenders a high level of self-esteem and job satisfaction for trainees and trainers alike, and leads to more manageable turnover and greater upward mobility. Many library managers operate under the assumption that support staff require a higher training investment than do librarians, basing this theory on the idea that librarians have received some basic training and are dedicated to the profession. This is an erroneous operating assumption, as the benefits derived from training and continuing education apply to all staff, regardless of level, status or length of tenure in the work unit.

An effective training program requires a partnership between management and staff that must be established early and maintained for the life of the working relationship. There must be a strong commitment on both sides: on the part of the manager to provide a varied and appropriate training program, and on the part of the employee to learn all she can, within and eventually outside of the framework provided by the manager. A self-reinforcing cycle is established at the outset by this partnership. The manager creates a supportive atmosphere where the initial teaching leads to increasing initiative and questioning on the part of the trainee. The best trained and most productive staff are those who self-diagnose needs for further training, and who continue this practice throughout their careers.

A particularly satisfying benefit of effective training programs is that in many cases, well-trained staff become trainers themselves. This development in fact may be seen as a continuation of the initial training program; the new trainer will increase his own learning in the process of teaching another. Staff who become trainers complete the cycle of investment, by facilitating management's effort to offer excellent training programs. The greater the pool of skilled trainers, the greater the flexibility in providing custom training to meet staff needs.

Aspects and Benefits of Training

New Hires

The interview of a potential new staff member is the first step in training. While the supervisor is sizing up the candidate and forming judgment as to her suitability for the job, the candidate too is gathering information. During the interview, the supervisor can begin training in a number of ways. Organizational mission and values can be communicated. General and specific expectations of staff can be described. Norms and behaviors can be both modeled and explicitly discussed. All of these points will need to be repeated when the new hire is on board. Repetition is a characteristic of good training, and it is never too soon to begin.

Orientation

The next step in training takes place during the first several weeks of work, with orientation. An overview of the organization and how the new employee and their unit within it fit, introductions to colleagues and top administrators, physical orientation to the building, and filling out official paperwork can be handled by different people: the supervisor, work unit colleagues, staff association officers, and personnel staff. Sharing the assignment in this way allows the employee to become acquainted with a variety of colleagues and viewpoints, and keeps the direct supervisor from being swamped. It is a good idea to alternate the new employee's schedule between orientation and on-the-job training, so as not to overwhelm him.

Orientation is an essential step in communicating the commitment of the organization to the employee. It shows that the supervisor and colleagues care enough to help the new person make the adjustment to the new environment and to begin the process of integrating him into the larger whole. It offers an excellent opportunity for values, norms and expected behaviors to be modeled and explicitly communicated, by supervisor, colleagues, and upper management. Here the partnership is begun.

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On-the-job Performance

The most widely accepted role for training is its application to on-the-job performance. To most supervisors it is obvious that new employees need to be trained to do the work expected of them. However, many supervisors do not invest in training at a level that produces its desired outcome —excellent performance. When the level of investment is lower than it should be, the trainee is handicapped in trying to learn necessary skills. More importantly, an undesirable approach to the work becomes the model for the employee. Haphazard, disorganized, unskilled or incomplete training sends multiple unhappy messages to the employee: we don't care enough about you to train you properly; we don't know what we're doing; we don't care how well the work gets done; we are inefficient. In contrast, a well planned and organized training program carried out by a skilled and knowledgeable trainer sends reinforcing messages to the employee: we respect and care about you and want you to succeed; we take our work very seriously; we are well trained ourselves and will help you to reach that point; we are concerned with the quality of our products and services; we are well organized and efficient. The results of this kind of training program are higher quality and productivity, as well as enhanced self-esteem and job satisfaction for both the employee and the trainer.

The Big Picture

Educating staff in the big picture cannot be overemphasized. In technical services units where processes may be complex, specialization encouraged, and contact with library users sparse, supervisors need to impart an understanding of how the whole picture fits together. Creating a well-rounded employee requires a holistic approach. A beginning component includes explanations and connections sprinkled throughout on-the-job training. For example, the cataloging trainer explains how series tracings are constructed, shows the trainee how check-in relies on these tracings by acquainting her with the Kardex or online check-in file, and takes her through a search session at the public catalog using series tracings as access points and explaining how such citations might be discovered by library users. These kinds of links should be made for the duration of the training process. In fact, big picture training should be extended through a program of continuing education for experienced staff.

Staff who are trained to understand the way their work contributes to the mission of the organization, and the effects each step has on the work of colleagues and the use of the library, are consistently higher performers than those who work in a vacuum. This understanding further contributes to their own job satisfaction and self-esteem, and they have greater potential for upward mobility. The manager who promotes this kind of holistic training will reap the benefits of increased participation in management of the work unit, with more and better suggestions for streamlining and improving products and services and a greater interest in and aptitude for working on special projects.

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Interpersonal Skills

The most effective employees are those who communicate clearly and readily and cooperate with colleagues and management. For an employee to communicate and collaborate most effectively, training in listening, assertiveness, and acceptance of different styles and behaviors is needed. The old story that technical staff have no need for interpersonal skills is a myth. Technical staff are required to work with a variety of staff on complex tasks, functioning across organizational lines and negotiating for resources to accomplish their work. They are required to provide high quality customer service both to colleagues and to library users.

Training in interpersonal skills contributes to networking within and outside of individual work units, and empowers staff to negotiate solutions without supervisory intervention. Like other forms of training, it enhances upward mobility and participation in management. This kind of training can be offered to staff in formal courses or in one-on-one sessions with supervisors. One of the most dramatic ways to enhance group interpersonal skills is to sponsor professionally facilitated work unit retreats and expeditions, in which staff learn to communicate and understand one another outside of the work environment. For example, group orienteering with map and compass across fields and woodlands may yield startling metaphors for the teamwork required to bring up a new automated system or to design and implement a new technical workflow.

Continuing Education and Development

All of the principles that apply to the training of new hires also apply to veteran staff. Once that initial investment has been made, it must be maintained and nurtured. Even if this were not necessary in terms of human needs, the fact is that our technical work is far from static. In an area where the demands and the technology may change daily, supervisors owe it to their staff to support them in keeping up-to-date. In addition, the holistic employee can never learn enough about the ways in which his work fits in with and impacts upon the work of others in the library and its parent organization. Continuing education and development involves formal coursework, conferences and workshops, committee and project work, retreats and expeditions. Regular, open discussions among colleagues on topics of interest are a part of this effort. Participatory management can provide fertile ground for this kind of exchange: individual staff members can submit proposals for new procedures, policies or services, and those proposals can be modified and improved upon through group consideration. In this process, everyone learns and customers benefit.

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Training as a Facilitator of Change

Technological Change

It is generally accepted that training is a key factor in bringing about technological change. A change in technology may involve the introduction of a total automated system, new software in an already familiar system, or a revised cataloging code or cataloging standards. Most managers will admit that, if staff are to be expected to utilize a new technology, they have to learn to use it. Unfortunately, this enlightened attitude often does not extend to an equally enlightened implementation of training. Many supervisors either expect, or by default require, that staff train themselves to use new tools. It is easy to forget that staff who are currently productive and well trained got that way with help, and that they need help to master the new situation. Training in

the context of technological change is as essential as it is in the context of new employment, and requires as much of an investment on the part of the supervisor. It may be helpful for supervisors to think of staff in this situation as new employees, in need of a high degree of personal attention, nurturing, orientation and education.

Organizational Change

Training is equally effective as a facilitator of organizational change. In these days of mergers and splits among technical service units, staff anxiety is at an all-time high. Resistance to reorganization is largely based on fear of the unknown. In a reorganization, staff are expected to take on new duties, give up comfortable routines, work within a new group, and either report to a new supervisor or learn to share a familiar one. Reorientation, teambuilding and on-the-job performance are all enhanced by carefully planned and implemented training initiatives. This is an ideal opportunity for the supervisor to build trust among new staff and reinforce relationships with existing staff. By providing complete, well organized training in areas of new responsibility or technology, the supervisor demonstrates commitment to building the new team and to supporting staff in a time of stress. Staff can be assigned to orient and train each other in unfamiliar routines and duties, and get to know and respect each other in the process.

Cultural Change

Perhaps the most difficult type of change to implement successfully is cultural change within an organization. Here again training can be an effective tool. For example, in technical service units, there may be a tradition of imposed or self-perceived separation from public service units and functions. This kind of isolation can lead to dysfunctional behaviors such as refusal to alter procedures in order to provide materials quickly for users, unhelpful or discourteous telephone manner when dealing with public service staff, and a general disorientation from the larger mission of the library. Training can be used as part of a larger strategy to bring about the change to a culture of user service for technical staff. Such a program might include cross-training or job visits between public and technical staff at similar levels; customer service training, including telephone manners and handling customer complaints; and general interpersonal skills training. Discussions can be held in which staff identify obstacles to effective customer service. They are taught ways either to eliminate those obstacles,

communicate with management about solutions, or learn to live with them if they are insoluble.

A wrinkle on the role of training in effecting cultural, organizational and technological change is illustrated by a case that occurred in Perkins Library over a period of several years. In 1985, the Monographic Cataloging Department began a training program that spanned two sections: the Original Cataloging Section and the Copy Cataloging Section. Both new and experienced original catalogers, all librarians, were trained by experienced copy catalogers, all support staff, to do copy cataloging according to newly developed standards. There were a variety of responses to what was perceived by many as the role reversal of having support staff train librarians. Long-standing feelings of oppression or exclusion on the part of the support staff, and fears of erosion of the profession on the part of the librarians, sometimes caused conflict to flare. But the program was highly successful on a variety of fronts: greater consistency was achieved between original and copy cataloging standards; original catalogers who had never had experience with copy cataloging gained new perspective; relationships were forged across unit and status lines, with new respect established in both directions; support staff knowledge and abilities were strongly affirmed both by management and colleagues; and a new team of strong, able trainers was created. Support staff had assumed a significant new role in the organization, a step toward a change from a hierarchial, librarian-dominated culture to a flatter, more collegial culture. In late 1986, when the Original and Copy Cataloging Sections were merged to form the Cataloging Section, experience with and relationships formed in this effort in cultural and technological change helped smooth the path to effective organizational change.

Conclusion

In technical or public services, regardless of the level of the staff in question, no investment will reap better return for managers and staff than working to provide excellent training programs. Flexibility is the key in these programs, both to provide learning opportunities customized to individual style, and to adapt to or facilitate changes in the working environment. Without the bond created by an excellent training program, the partnership between staff and management is weak and ineffective.