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Part 1: WHY TRAINING FAILS

Have you been pleased with the results of the training your company has been paying for? Has it been as successful as you hoped? If not, consider these four reasons HVAC industry training often fails and how you may actually play a role.

Now I don't want to start out here with a whole lot of studies and statistics, but I think it is important to understand what's at stake when we talk about why training fails. In 2001 Broad and Newstrom did extensive research on training and how well it is applied on the job. Their study showed roughly \$50 billion is spent on training by businesses every year. They also found that, at best, 50% of the training employees received was still being applied a year later.

That same year Brinkerhoff and Apking concluded that "if we define training impact as the transfer of knowledge and skills to on-the-job performance, research indicates that impact is realized only for about 15% of all training participants". Ouch! Training your employees should be an essential component of your business but statistics like that can be a little intimidating. So what are the key contributors to the failure of training?

Reason #1: Looking at Training as a Cost

Long ago and far away I remember my first manager in the HVAC training field used a quote from Henry Ford on employee training. Ford was asked "What if I train my people and they leave?" He matter-of-factly replied, "What if you don't train them... and they stay?" That quote, delivered by Vickie LaPlant as she spoke about the value of training has stuck with me all these years. Since those early days I have always advocated looking at training as an *investment* in a business, rather than simply a *cost* incurred.

But unfortunately, not every business receives a fair return on investment for the training they pay for. Why? What factors might keep you from maximizing your investment of valuable resources in training your employees? I say investment of *resources* because it is important to recognize from the outset that training requires more than just the dollars you spend for the training. You should also consider the cost of having your employees out of the field or out of the office for a period of time, the value of lost opportunity, and possibly expenses for travel and lodging. It can certainly add up. So the absolute last thing you want as a business owner or manager is to invest all of that into training your employees, and then not see any lasting positive results or benefits for the company!

Keep in mind the definitions of *cost* vs. *investment*. Cost is an amount you pay out, a price; a loss, sacrifice or a penalty. Investment is what you spend or use for future advantage or benefit. That is why the wrong attitude about training in your organization can inadvertently contribute to its failure. If you fail to see the potential for training to help

make the company more successful and more profitable, you may create your own self-fulfilling prophecy.

Reason #2: Not Training for the Right Reasons

It is also important to think about why you want to send an employee to training. Have you ever sent an employee to training just because your TM kept bugging you to send someone? Too often we send employees to training just because it's readily available, without regard to content, applicability, or developmental needs of the employee. We don't always make the connection between our business needs and objectives, and the training we are paying for.

Even worse, we choose training because it is cheap. Admit it - you hate it when your customers make their choice on price alone. After all, you know you have better products, do better quality work and have great service and therefore you are worth more. Consider the possibility that the same principle applies to the training you select.

The best reason to train is that you have identified a weakness in performance or skills that can be improved through training. Ideally the end result of training is a change in the employee's performance that improves productivity, quality, and profitability for the company. Using training for the wrong reasons, or to solve the wrong problem almost always ends in failure.

Reason #3: Viewing Training as an Event, Not a Process

In my experience one of the primary reasons training fails is that it is often viewed as a one-time event rather than a process. Have you ever sent an employee to a training class and when they return you say something like, "How was the training?" To which the employee replies, "Oh, it was pretty good." So you then say something like, "Great then, now that you're trained get back out there and start making us some money". I know I've certainly been guilty of that.

Transferring knowledge and skills learned to on-the-job performance, that's the very least you should aim for when you do decide to invest in training, right? Virtually all studies on human behavior tell us that people just don't accept change easily, or change themselves easily. You can send your employees to the best training available with fantastic content and terrific instructors. Participants may love the program and come away motivated to make the changes they learned. And for a while afterwards, they try hard and do well. But as the studies cited at the beginning of this article tell us, little of the training sticks long-term and people revert back to the old ways sooner or later. A lot of your money has been spent, but not much has changed. That is why taking a narrow view of training can doom your best intentions.

Reason #4: Lack of Follow-up or Reinforcement of Training.

There are two critical components to every learning experience. The first part involves mastering new skills and knowledge. The second part (and the one that pays off) involves making new skills and knowledge an integral part of day-to-day job performance. Many

training experts believe that the primary reason training fails isn't the training itself, but what happens afterward. Closely related to #3 above, it is this critical issue we need to look at more closely.

Zenger, Folkman and Sherwin (2005) found in their study that the most commonly cited problem in employee learning and development was lack of serious post-training follow through. The things that contributed to this problem included lack of management understanding of, or buy-in to the training, little or no coaching or encouragement of the employee after the training, and almost non-existent meaningful evaluation of the training. These things combine to form a significant obstacle to training success.

In another lifetime I was responsible for leading a team charged with developing and implementing a sales training program for a national HVAC sales force. Our team did due diligence in finding a great strategic partner, developing an effective sales process, creating a dynamic customized training program, and rolling out the shiny new training all over the country. We were rewarded by great reviews by participants, and even better, by significant increases in closing rate, average ticket, and profitability from those we trained. But as time passed we began to notice those great numbers slowly decreasing until many (not all) of the sales team members were back to pre-training levels of performance. What happened?

It is so obvious to me today, but then we scratched our heads and wondered what the heck went wrong. After all, this was great training and everybody loved it. And it worked... for a while anyway. Well, long story short – the piece of the puzzle we missed was that we were training the sales force, but not their managers. So when the employee returned to work they were all pumped up with new skills and enthusiasm, but their managers had no idea what they had learned or how to coach and support the new behaviors. They hadn't bought in to the value of the training. Even the most self-motivated person in the world can only maintain the higher level of performance for so long without reinforcement and follow-up. Once we trained the managers in the new sales techniques, and showed them how to coach and do follow-up training with their employees, the level of improvement was sustained at a higher level, for a much longer period of time.

As a business owner or manager, or even as an employee you establish and control the attitude about training in your company. By taking time to understand what training can and should do, and by setting the right tone you create an atmosphere more conducive to success. You have the power to make sure training doesn't fail, and that ensure your training investment pays the dividends you deserve. Next time: Tips for Making Sure Training Succeeds.

Part 2: MAKING SURE TRAINING SUCCEEDS

No matter how much your company invests in training each year you want to make sure you get your money's worth. How can you make sure you get more "bang" for your training buck?

Throughout my career in the HVAC industry I have been involved in training many companies and individuals. I've had the opportunity to watch many of them as they went back to the real world to apply new knowledge and skills they learned during training. And I've seen how some have been very successful with it, and how others have failed to have the training make much of an impact on their businesses.

In the previous article we talked about the reasons that training fails and you don't get the best return on investment for your training dollar. In this installment let's turn the negative into a positive and take a look at four critical ways you can help ensure training succeeds in *your* company.

Tip #1: Good Training Is Built Around *Your* Company Objectives

It's late in the afternoon after a long day at work and you are going through E-mails, Faxes, and mail that came in during the day. As you glance over all the bills, ads, and solicitations you come across a brochure for some upcoming training. Now you believe in training your employees, and this is a really nice brochure. So how do you make the decision whether or not to send people to this class?

Hopefully by now you won't say it's mostly based on price! If you want to maximize your return on training investment your first question should be "how will this training help me meet the objectives of the company?" In other words, you want to invest your money in training that will have a positive impact on your organization by (1) improving productivity, (2) cutting costs, and (3) increasing profitability. If the training offered doesn't meet that basic criteria, don't waste any more of your time.

If it looks like the training might have value and you decide to pursue it further, take time to investigate further. Check out the company providing the training, try to get more information about the qualifications of the instructors, and get a course description. If the course is technical in nature, how much of it is theory and how much is hands-on?

Finally, decide which employees would benefit the most from the training. Does the training address a need or a weakness in the organization, or in individual employees? Yes, all this may take a little time. But you take time to investigate every other investment you make in your business, like expanding staff, acquiring new vehicles, and purchasing new tools or equipment. Investment in training requires the same due diligence.

Tip #2: Effective Training Requires Communication

Once you've determined a training program meets the criteria discussed in the previous tip, the next step is to communicate with the employee or employees who are to attend it. All too often good training can be wasted if those attending don't really know why they are there or what they are supposed to take away. You can overcome this problem by explaining to the employee what they can expect from the training, and why the new skills or skill enhancement is necessary. Have you ever attended training and couldn't really see what the link was between it and your job? Be sure you provide that link to those attending training.

You can further enhance the impact of the training if you can communicate to the employee how the training will increase his or her ability to contribute to reaching the business's objectives. Most employees want the company to do well and be profitable. If they can see how training helps make that happen it is likely to be more successful.

And let's face it, everyone's favorite radio station is WII FM (What's In It For Me). Good communication should also include showing the employee how this new knowledge or skill will help them in their career path, and provide them with added compensation and job satisfaction.

Tip #3: Coaching and Reinforcement are Critical

Once the training is completed, follow-up and applying what was learned during the training is where many of us fall short. Training only produces tangible results when it changes behavior and attitude. Since it is unlikely that long-term change will occur as a result of a single training session, coaching and reinforcement of the training is required. Motorola, Inc. did a study that found that training reinforced by management got a \$33 return on every dollar invested. Training with no management follow-up had a negative return on investment. People naturally follow the leader, so any training program will be more successful if management supports it.

When new and improved skills and/or behavior patterns are introduced to employees, the old ways are constantly competing with the new ones. Even though employees want to do it and know it makes sense to do it, change can be uncomfortable and it's easy to slip back into old habits. So this goes back to treating training as a process rather than a single event.

To effect a long-lasting change you must do two things: reinforce the training through repetition, and provide ongoing feedback and support. That means that managers and supervisors have to regularly monitor on-the-job performance to make sure employees are incorporating new skills and knowledge properly. It is equally essential that you provide additional opportunities to strengthen those skills through additional training. This might take the form of refresher training during weekly meetings, coaching on the job, or sending employees to follow-up training classes. And here's a great way to reinforce training – assign those who have been through training to teach others in the company during short 20 minute segments at your weekly tech meeting.

Don't leave your employees to go it alone and expect training to stick. Give them support and encouragement to continue to apply what they learned, and recognize and reward their accomplishments.

Tip #4: Measurement and Accountability are a Must

In Tip #1 we talked about aligning training with the company's business objectives. Once you have done that then it just makes good sense to check back periodically and make sure those objectives are being met. The only way to maximize the benefit of your training investment is to measure performance and require accountability for that performance.

Training professionals use a scale developed by Donald Kirkpatrick for evaluating training. The scale starts at Level 1, which essentially only tells us whether participants liked the training. The top of the scale is Level 4 which evaluates results of training and whether it makes an impact on the organization. In 2000 the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) reported that about 95% of training was measured at Level 1 while only 3% was measured at Level 4. If you are only measuring at Level 1, how will you know if training was successful and has been integrated into daily business practice?

Be certain you have defined benchmarks established to measure the results of training against. Certainly you want to look at overall profitability of the department or company both pre and post training. You should also set up more specific measurements. For example, in your service department you might want to look at average revenue per ticket. You could also look at average length of each service call and percentage of calls completed on the first trip. Customer satisfaction scores and call back percentages are other good indicators. Once you begin measuring performance you establish a baseline that then allows you to track whether new knowledge and skills are being applied consistently, and to recognize if employees are beginning to slip back into old habits.

Alright, I know this all seems like a lot to do, but if you will implement these key components into your training program you should see more impressive results. In addition to a better return on your training investment you should also benefit from higher employee morale, lower turnover, increased productivity, and improved customer satisfaction. But remember that leadership must start at the top. Lead with a firm commitment to making training work in your company by setting goals, effective communication, supporting and reinforcing, and measuring results. So my hope is the next time you're going through that stack of mail and run across that training flyer you'll look at it in a whole new way.

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