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IMPERATIVES FOR THE TRANSFER OF EXPERIENCE-BASED TRAINING

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ABSTRACT

The transfer of beneficial attitudes, beliefs, and skills to application in the workplace defines the success or failure experience-based training. Based on a review of organizational development and experience-based training literature, this paper proposes three, comprehensive imperatives supported as essential to successful of transfer of experience-based training.

INTRODUCTION

The field of experience-based training has been continually challenged to demonstrate its effectiveness as an organizational intervention. As organizations increase their awareness and sophistication In procuring training and development resources, experience-based training practitioners will have an increasing need to demonstrate the potential for transfer in their training designs (Wagner & Rowland, 1995).

This paper presents three imperatives to enhance the rate and permanence of transfer from experience-based learning interventions to the workplace. Specific methodologies for which these concepts are relevant include, but are not limited to, wilderness experiential learning, adventure-based training, simulation, gaming, and action learning activities.

LIMITATIONS OF TRANSFER RESEARCH

The process of transfer has been specifically addressed in the field of experience-based training. Notable contributions in this area have been made by Priest and others (e.g., Priest & Lesperance, 1994) in the Corporate Adventure Training Institute outcome studies and Case, Priest, and others in the use of metaphor as a basis of enhancing transfer. The Importance of transfer of experience-based training has also been addressed from a systematic, organizational development perspective (Flor, 1991).

Given the vital importance of transfer in experience-based training practice, there is less research related to the transfer process than might be expected. Priest and Lesperance (1994) point out the critical lack of empirical evidence to support the use of adventure-based training as successful methodology. While research-based evaluation studies have been conducted on experienced-based training interventions (Wagner & Rowland, 1992; Priest, Attarian, & Schubert, 1993), few reports address evaluation with this degree of rigor.

The preponderance of evaluation reports for experience-based interventions are based on "smile sheets," or other subjective evaluations of the training itself rather than transfer. Few experiential learning research efforts have been focused on specific, objectively measured transfer behaviors and still fewer on objective measures of performance.

THREE IMPERATIVES FOR TRANSFER

The research and writing that illuminates these shortcomings related to transfer also suggests new directions that experience-based training must take if the field is to continue to develop. These new directions have been organized under three comprehensive imperatives.

Imperative One: A Systemic Approach

The value of a systemic approach to organizational development has been well established. A systemic perspective places an emphasis on linking training initiatives to the guiding mission and objectives of the organization. At the same time, systemic training Interventions are designed to take Into account the needs and perspectives of the training participants and the demands of their organizational environment (Brinkerhoff & Gill, 1994).

Broad and Newstrom (1992) have offered an effective, systemic model for the transfer of training which is well suited to experience-based training. This model divides the training process into three time frames (before, during, and after training) and three primary roles (trainee, trainer, and manager).

Hallowell (1995) has adapted this model to fit the framework of the experience-based professional. This model points out the critically important nature of the relationship between the experience-based trainer and the principle contact for a given organization. A clear and mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities must be established early in this relationship. Important Issues defined Include the purpose and desired outcomes of the intervention, the connection with organizational mission or objectives, ongoing changes, and specific content areas targeted for transfer to the workplace.

Imperative Two: Support Over Time

Perhaps the greatest challenge for the experience-based trainer is managing the transition between the experience-based training and the return to the work place in a survey of trainers, Newstrom (1986) found that lack of reinforce-

ment, interference at the work site, and a non-supportive organizational culture were seen as the top three barriers to the transfer of training.

Action planning, learning logs, peer coaching, and scheduled one-day follow-up sessions have been cited as valuable techniques to promote transfer. The experience-based intervention may also serve as a springboard for more extensive strategic planning sessions. Transfer may also be supported by facilitating a model problem-solving or total quality Improvement session at the end of the experience-based intervention.

Experience-based training professionals and leaders of the organization can reinforce experiential learning in several ways. One successful technique is to frame current work-related challenges as an experiential activity. For example, a group may be asked to think of a complex scheduling process as a maze activity. Following Priest and Glass nomenclature, this metaphor might be called a retro-morph."

Finally, It is critical that the intended outcomes of an experience-based Intervention be evaluated over time. End of session evaluations of a specific intervention are not sufficient to validate the effectiveness of an intervention. Priest, Attrain, arid Schubert (1993) have presented sound, research-based evaluation models for experience-based training programs.

Imperative Three: Taking the Role of Consultant

In a critique of experience-based training providers, Stoltz (1995) states that one of the "sins" of experience-based trainers is that they see "themselves as program providers rather than change consultants" (p.21). In general, a consultant's involvement is seen as far more pervasive and time-Intensive than the role of a service provider.

What Stoltz (1995) falls to address in his perspective Is the difference between a change consultant and a service provider. This involvement may be extended to include the multiple steps of traditional OD consultation models. For example, McLean and Sullivan (1989) suggest an eight-step consultation process Including: entry, start-up, assessment, action planning, intervention, evaluation, adoption, and separation. This is the kind of relationship that a successful experienced-based trainer must have in order to personally address the issues of transfer raised by this paper.

CONCLUSION

If the field of experience-based training is to gain credibility and demonstrate effectiveness in organizations, we must attend carefully to the transfer issue. Fully implemented, a systemic, time-Intensive, consultation-based intervention

requires a great deal of practitioners and their programs. Selling, designing, and implementing this kind of comprehensive program will require substantially more preparation and resources than a simple, stock experience-based program. However, practitioners who seek to facilitate real and lasting change in their clients systems will find this investment worthwhile.

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