

# How to Get Better All The Time through Training and Development

By Patrick Ibarra, The Mejorando Group

There has been, and will continue to be, rapid and at times unprecedented change that creates tremendous impacts on the collective ability of government organizations and their employees to meet, if not exceed, the public's increasingly high expectations. Essential to satisfying the public's demand for services is the ability of your agency's employees—the combination of their smarts, skills, attitudes and behaviors.

Beyond investments in capital and technology, what is your agency's strategy for investing in your workforce? Do you find yourself riding the ebb and flow of budgets dedicated to employee growth and development? Are the retirement parties you're attending almost weekly, foreshadowing an uncertain future with regard to employee performance? If you answered yes to any of these questions, read on and you'll discover a strategy and series of techniques to help your employees get better all the time through targeted training and development activities.

Each of us has our own personal accounting of situations when training is the only tool (e.g. hammer) managers and supervisors consider when confronting a performance problem with an employee. As a consequence, everything they identify as a possible cause for the performance problem is a nail that can be repaired with a one-day (or shorter, if you please) training workshop. This reflects a "training as an event" mentality. As any experienced HR professional knows, people are rather complicated, and typically the issues related to improving their performance require more than one quick fix of a dose of

training. When training is misapplied and meaningful results are not realized, it can gain a reputation of either being ineffective, or worse, irrelevant.

Moreover, there is another assumption in the workplace which is that increasing one's knowledge will translate into changed behavior. Every day in organizations, managers and supervisors with good intentions send their employees off to training comfortable in their view that what he or she needed was simply more knowledge, and that's the ticket for the employee to change their behavior. This approach does not factor in the organizational culture, the manager/supervisor's support, and an assortment of conditions, which must be present for the employee to translate their learning to their job.

Just what are the key factors that help the return on dollars invested in training and development of employees to be realized and employee performance improved?

## A Results-Based approach to Improving Employee Performance through Training and Development

The Phoenix, Ariz.-based Mejorando Group's approach is systematic and incorporates best practices among organizations from the public and private sectors. As a precaution, the group discourages the tendency to "cherry pick" those steps that are easiest, least expensive, and/or most familiar.



**1. Assessment:** The first step is focused on individual employees and can be completed as part of the performance appraisal process with the emphasis on identifying which areas of performance the employee needs strengthening prior to implementing potential solutions. For the assessment to accurately reflect an employee's performance and capabilities it requires input beyond an employee self-assessment and a review by his/her supervisor/manager. Input that includes a number of key stakeholders—co-workers and direct reports to name two sources.

Commonly referred to as a 360-degree process because it involves a multitude of people the employee interacts with, an assessment is important because it gives people an understanding of where they are now: what their current strengths are, the level of their current performance, and what are seen as primary training and development needs (there are a number of excellent feedback instruments available from both the Center for Creative Leadership and Development Dimensions International.). In the context of their everyday work, people may not be aware of the degree to which their usual behaviors or actions are effective; in the face of a new challenge, they may not know what to continue doing and what to change. Even if they do realize that what they are doing is ineffective, people may believe the answer is to just work harder; it may not occur to them to try a new strategy. But when receiving feedback on how they are doing and how they might improve, people are more likely to understand their situation and to capitalize on a learning opportunity.

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One important function of assessment data is that it provides a benchmark for future development. Another is that the data stimulates people to evaluate themselves. “What am I doing well?” “Where do I need to improve?” “What are others’ views of me?” “How do my behaviors impact others?” “How am I doing relative to my goals?” “What’s important to me?” Still another function is that assessment data provides information that helps people answer these questions. The result is an unfreezing of one’s current understanding of self, to facilitate movement toward a broader and more complex understanding.

As an alternative to individual employee assessments, agencies might instead pursue Training Needs Assessments (TNAs). TNAs can be useful, but they also present severe limitations: the only solution they offer is training and as has been outlined, employee performance is impacted by a variety of factors, only a few of which can be positively impacted by training. Indeed, training can impact skill and knowledge deficiencies. Consider pursuing a Performance Needs Assessment instead, which identifies the assortment of factors that impact employee performance and will offer a series of solutions including both training and development.

**2. Individual Training and Development Plan (ITDP):** Once the assessment is completed, the employee and the person coaching them, who might be an HR department member, the employee’s supervisor or an outside consultant, should co-create a detailed ITDP that specifies particular training and non-training—i.e. development—solutions that will close performance gaps for the employee.

According to *Human Resource Management* by Robert L. Mathis and John H. Jackson (South-Western College Publishing), there are various types of training that should be considered when preparing an ITDP:

- **Required and Regular training:** Complies with various mandated legal requirements, e.g. occupational safety, EEO.
- **Job/technical training:** Enables employees to perform their jobs, tasks, and responsibilities well, e.g. equipment use, technical processes and procedures, customer relations.
- **Interpersonal and problem-solving training:** Addresses both operational and interpersonal problems and seeks to improve organizational working relationships, e.g. interpersonal communication, managerial/supervisory skills, conflict resolution, etc.
- **Developmental and innovative training:** Provides a long-term focus to enhance individual and organizational capabilities for the future, e.g. management practices, executive development, and organizational change.

Development of employees should be intentional and by design, instead of an all-too-common practice of it happening serendipitously. That is, someone leaves the organization and their backup simply assumes some of their responsibilities. Also known as “baptism by fire,” it often is wrought with stress and unpredictability for the employee and the consequence is unplanned. As an alternative, to truly assist employees and thereby your organization, development should receive as much if not more attention than training solutions. Development typically does not happen in the classroom, but instead through a range of strategies as advocated by Bucker and Slavenski in their Succession Planning Info Line:

- **Variety of Job Assignments:** People learn lessons from different job assignments—line to staff switches, starting from scratch, fix-it opportunities, larger or smaller scope jobs—and from setbacks.

- **On-the-Job Coaching:** Becoming increasingly more popular, on-the-job coaching involves day-to-day discussions between the manager and the individual. It may be used to upgrade skills or technical knowledge and may involve progress discussions, or working through an actual problem with the individual to provide direction and guidance.
- **Shadowing:** Following another person around and observing what they do—“shadowing” them—can be helpful in learning about a particular area or function.
- **Job Enrichment:** This involves expanding present responsibilities to include a wider variety of assignments and duties. It is effective for improving both skill and knowledge areas, but should be limited to those who already are effective in their present positions, since it requires expanding work performance rather than simply adding more of the same work.
- **Taskforce Assignments:** This is beneficial to acquiring skills for complex problem resolution or issues that involve a broad organizational scope. This strategy develops current job performance and promotion potential.
- **Serving as a Conference Leader or Instructor:** Preparation and research for teaching can provide valuable knowledge, while serving as a leader or

instructor may provide development in a range of skill areas. Employees who attend training classes and conference sessions should be encouraged to return and share knowledge with fellow employees.

**3. Implement Plan:** Once resources have been identified and a schedule prepared, the training and development activities in the ITDP should be implemented, which means attending training and instituting development activities. It is not enough to simply arrive at a comprehensive ITDP for an employee,

but that it must be executed. This means executing the plan not only when it’s convenient or as some like to refer to it, “when I have time...” but to be diligent and ensure that training and development activities are viewed as essential to an employee’s performance and not simply as a perk or optional. A strong message about the importance of employee learning and growth by the agency’s chief administrative officer and members of senior management is essential. This type of message can be extremely influential to an agency’s workforce about the urgency with which they embrace their participation in training workshops and development programs. If ITDPs are poorly executed, employees receive a very clear signal—the organization’s commitment to their growth and development was more talk than action. This can result in significant barriers the next time an attempt is made by the organization to pursue the creation of ITDPs, as employees may be understandably skeptical about their efforts translating into a positive outcome. Therefore, it is imperative the organization comprehend at the beginning of the cycle and commit to the investment of time and effort that actually executing employees’ IDTPs will require.

**4. Evaluate and Make Changes:** Periodic check-ins should be completed for both individual employees and the workforce in general to determine the impact and subsequent outcome of implementing ITDPs. Sample questions to consider when assessing progress should include:

- Are employees more prepared now to assume new responsibilities or poised for a promotion as compared with a year or so ago?
- What results that weren’t happening previously are employees who attend

The key to effective training is that it is designed to:

- Maximize the similarity between the training situation and the job situation;
- Devote as much time and opportunity for skills practice as possible;
- Provide for a variety of examples when teaching concepts or skills;
- Make sure that general principles are understood before expecting too much transfer;
- Provide participants with the knowledge, skills and feelings of self-efficacy to self-regulate their own behavior/performance back on their jobs; and
- Design the training content so that the participants can see its applicability

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trainings now achieving? (FYI: Tallying the number of people who attend training is simply an output indicating nothing about the effectiveness of training.)

- How have perceptions changed among your workforce regarding their preparedness for upcoming workplace challenges?
- How are employees who have been promoted performing in their new role?

Gathering information to these questions will provide insight into the effectiveness of the agency's workforce investment strategy and highlight areas of strength and areas for improvement. Prior to making any changes, factor in both what's working for individuals and what's working for the organization. That is to say, be careful not to dismiss an entire track of professional training because a small number of employees were unsuccessful in translating their learning back to the job, while several other employees who attended the same training did improve their performance, and vice-versa. You want to capture trends for each individual employee and the workforce so changes you institute reflect forethought and precision.

Two critical factors for training and development activities to be successful are the underlying attitude by employees about participating and the role of the employee's manager/supervisor. Employees can learn a great deal through training workshops and development programs. What helps them translate their learning back on their job is when the organizational culture reflects a healthy attitude, through words and deeds, about the role of learning in an employee's continued growth. If an organization's workforce holds a healthy perspective recognizing the role of learning as a way to stay fully qualified in a current position, as well as a path towards a possible promotion, then employees view training and development as legitimate investments of their time, effort and energy.

The second factor is the role played by the manager or supervisor of the employee who participates in training and development programs. Managers and supervisors are strongly encouraged to engage in a sit-down discussion with the employee prior to the employee beginning participation in a development program or attending a training workshop. This discussion should address the purpose of each activity and how it will help improve the employee's performance. Additionally, a supervisor or manager should stress what type of assistance or support he or she intends to offer the employee to strengthen the likelihood that what the employee learns is translated effectively to behavior back on the job. These types of conversations send powerful signals to employees that training and development are truly investments in their continued growth and that the organization is committed to their being successful with their investment. This fosters a reciprocal relationship between the employee and the organization.

## Tips for hiring outside trainers

From time to time, you may choose to hire an outside training firm to design and deliver workshops for your agency's employees. The following are suggestions to consider when doing so:

- 1. Watch and Learn:** Observe a training workshop the individual or firm is delivering for another agency. Be sure the trainer has received permission for you to visit and observe. While observing their delivery, pay special attention to the linkage they make between topics, their general presentation skills, how they respond to questions and concerns participants raise, and their use of a range of activities, i.e. small group, writing, reading, opportunities for skill

practices, large group, etc. There should be a healthy mix of training activities that reflect adult learning principles.

- 2. Check Up:** Ask for and contact references. Find out about their level of experience in government organizations, reliability in meeting deadlines, organization skills regarding logistics, certifications they might hold, and the value that has on their training skills. You will invite this professional into your organization and want to be sure they possess a positive and professional reputation.
- 3. Showmanship Isn't Enough:** Being an extrovert and funny doesn't always translate to being a good trainer; an entertaining trainer does not compensate for the lack of strong and effective content. At the same time, stoicism can be misinterpreted for aloofness, which can hinder even the best training content. Try to find an experienced professional who has the ability to engage and sustain the attention of participants and who delivers rich content in an effective way.
- 4. Read Up:** Ask to review training materials, i.e. handouts, used in other workshops they have delivered. You want to be sure there is a reasonable mixture of reading, writing, and doing, i.e. practicing what they are learning, and listening. People learn through all these avenues. If there are no handouts or if there are limited pages in the handouts, it may be an indication that a majority of the training is either lecture based or PowerPoint driven. Both of these can be useful in delivering training, but what you do not want and participants definitely do not want is either a straight lecture or 50-plus slides that lull them to sleep. The latter is a presentation and should not be confused with training.
- 5. Impact:** Ask trainers for copies of evaluation summaries of training workshops that they have delivered. If they do not provide any, it may be a sign

that either they view training as an event without concern for its impact or they have evaluations but insufficient positive comments were generated for you to read. Either way make sure trainers you hire always evaluate the training they deliver, at least at a level-one reaction level. Even better are trainers who are experienced in conducting levels two through four evaluations, (ala the Kirkpatrick Model) which evaluate the employee's knowledge, performance and influence on organizational outcomes, or results.

- 6. Follow Up:** Find out what types of follow up trainers will do once the workshop is completed. After the workshop is over, employees will undoubtedly have a question related to how to use what they learned in the training in a particular situation that comes up. The Mejorando Group provides up to 90 days of e-mail support to each participant in its training workshops as well as an online chat forum.

With resources fluctuating and customer/citizen expectations rising, it is imperative that agencies implement a targeted training and development program. By following the four-phase approach outlined in this article, your agency will craft a targeted program that links resources with results and the dividends realized will be improved employee performance and increased organizational effectiveness.

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*Patrick Ibarra, a former city manager and human resource director, owns and operates The Mejorando Group ([www.gettingbetterallthetime.com](http://www.gettingbetterallthetime.com)). Spanish for "getting better all the time," his firm partners with governments to help them increase employee performance and organizational effectiveness by providing consultation, facilitation, and training. Ibarra can be reached by phone at (925) 518-0187 or by e-mail at [patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com](mailto:patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com). —N*