

Urban Putty

The Newsletter of the Acorn Centre

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Confucius Says...

Those who are born wise are the highest type of people;
Those who become wise through learning come next;
Those who learn by overcoming dullness come after that.
Those who are dull but still won't learn are the lowest type of people...
I won't teach a man who is not anxious to learn,
And will not explain to one who is not trying to make things clear to himself.
If I hold up one corner of a square and a man cannot come back to me with
the other three,
I won't bother to go over the point again.

Confucius in the Analects, quoted in Great Religions of the World, National Geographic Society, 1971, p. 127

Sometimes, when we least expect it, we run across a most significant, and ancient thought. This one from Confucius is such a moment. Long before this generation of readers was in the genetic pipeline, Confucius outlined a marketing plan, complete with a target market, as well as a recruiting guideline for a training and development company.

I recently received a cogent, pithy comment from a wise friend on the topic of "training" and "trainers". Here is what he wrote:

"I've run across a lot of self-styled 'trainers' in my time and originality is definitely not their strong point. If it doesn't come out of a book or off the Internet or lend itself to a nice cutesy adage of one sort or another, they're not interested."

While there is a distinctly undemocratic flavour to his perspective, Confucius has discerned one of the most significant paradoxes of the training and development sector of the economy. In the words of another wise human resources professional "The client who is seeking training most often does not really know what kind of training is needed or desired."

Most often, clients who observe workplace performance, attitudes, interactions, and the implications or results of these stimuli, seek to reduce the incidence of certain attitudes, behaviours or poor performances. In business terms, any negative impact on time or dollars is considered a human resource problem. It might take the form of absenteeism, increased health insurance claims, conflict, or defiance of authority. Sometimes it's much more subtle, like "dogging it" - stretching the work out to last longer, effectively raising the per-unit cost of each item coming off the production line.

So, on the one hand, the human resource professional wants to “improve productivity,” and the people among whom the improvements are to be generated are told they will report to a training session at 9 a.m. on Monday morning.

- How many of those workers actually seek to learn?
- How many of those workers believe they know more about the job than any training specialist?
- How many of those workers have even spoken about their specific attitude or perception of the workplace to a co-worker?
- How many bring a catalogue of memories of school or college where they were given various kinds of feedback, certainly not the large percentage of it positive?
- How many have been through various training programs already, without much of the material making much difference in the levels of productivity, or in the “atmosphere” of the workplace?

There is a piece of reality which all training and development companies naturally face, in this market. Packaged in numerical terms, it looks like this:

Approximately six months following most corporate and organizational trainings, there is virtually nothing from the training being used in practical application by those people who experienced the training.

Now if any respectable auto maker were to learn that six months after the purchase of his product, virtually none of his products were still on the road, that would constitute a terminal illness. His bankers would pull their support.

This application of the training is one of the most critical for our sector to address. At The Acorn Centre, we believe it is so critical, that we design our full curriculum with it in mind. Interviews with workers at all levels of the organization provide a sampling of perceptions of the workplace culture, the history, the level of tension and anxiety, the quality of the leadership, etc. prior to the delivery of the training. Throughout the training, there are many opportunities for participants to share additional information, both personal and organizational, in a safe environment. Upon completion, once again, more feedback, and a transition into the next phase, the application phase of the training.

This is the time when not only material reviews, as applied to specific “real” situations is implemented, but also personal schedules for continuing feedback of achievement of measurable benchmarks are prepared. We believe that, if supported and encouraged in a legitimate information loop, with appropriate rewards for personal achievements introduced in the training, most workers response positively. Our professional detachment from the long-term, daily operation of the organization gives us a clear advantage when implementing such programs. Since the time-table is designed by the individual client, s/he claims ownership for its implementation into his/her work behaviour. Since the company is only interested in the results, within a reasonable time and cost parameter, the company is very pleased with the individual and group shifts in attitude, behaviour or even in creativity.

While skills enhancement may be the tip of the need iceberg, from the perspective of the human resource professional there may be some “non-skill” component to the learning needs of the individual. We seek to identify all the individual client’s perceptions about new learning, the perceptions of the culture toward new learning,

and, in some cases, the lack of eagerness to learn which plagues many workplace cultures in North America.

For example, if a client is stimulated about the new learning, but his co-workers pooh-pooh his enthusiasm, as is the case in many workplaces, his/her enthusiasm must be repressed. S/He wants to belong and be considered normal by co-workers! "Those who are dull but still won't learn" is a negative phrase behind which many workers hide. Most people, if asked, in a public setting, if they would like to learn something new, or some new way of thinking and operating, would likely respond positively. Most who resist new ideas are unconsciously camouflaging insecurities about learning experiences. For many, when learning is imposed from outside, say from the human resource department or a manager attempting to shift the spotlight from a defective managerial style onto an unco-operative workforce, they experience a legitimate resistance. Who wouldn't?

"I won't teach a man who is not anxious to learn" is clearly not a maxim any training and development company can apply so strictly that its application would preclude new business. But we are extremely conscious that one of our principle tasks is to bring the most resistant learner to the place where s/he is truly "anxious to learn." This is not a matter of histrionics, theatrics, or gimmicks to attract attention and motivate.

This is a much more subtle and sophisticated nexus, the moment when learner and trainer meet, greet and connect for the very first time. It is a moment which defies engineering, pre-planning, script, or a pre-determined outcome, and yet it qualifies as potentially one of the most important in the learning contract of the organization with the learning company.

How many stories have been written about the "moment when I met X and began to see myself, my work, and potential differently"? When such a moment occurs in the life of that individual, the universe sings and dances, even if s/he is the only one consciously aware of it. This is one of the great impacts of quantum physics. The universe knows and responds to such a re-awakening!

When the past is declared impotent, especially if past learning has been clouded with agony, freeing this moment from the weight of those clouds so a new "note" can be struck in a different key and rhythm (which carries both learner and teacher), even the dullest will try to "come back with the other three corners" without any forced requirement. It will be natural, and the universe will celebrate!

And so will we at The Acorn Centre!