

Training that hits the target

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How do you design training that fills a gap in someone's competency?

How do you conduct training that is not boring?

How do you insure that the training doesn't fall on deaf ears?

This is an important set of questions. I would like to present a model for competence in any knowledge or skill area. The square represents the field of all the knowledge or skill needed to do the job (whether it is a welding or a reliability engineering position).

The white circles are holes in the person's competency. If we started with a young person just out of college or trade school we would find many holes. If we would revisit the same person 5 years later many of the holes have been filled in with experience, ongoing schooling and iOJT (intentional On the Job Training).

If the environment is a rich one where the new employee can get a wide range of experience then they will have more holes filled in by experience. Conversely if the environment is not rich then a few holes would be filled. That is the reason that apprenticeships are important. They insure for the first few years, at least, the person is in an intentionally rich environment with alternating working and classroom assignments.

An old timer will have most of the circles filled for the environment they are in, as long as that environment stays stable. Once the environment is in flux then the old timer's knowledge and competence base gradually becomes less aligned with the field of competency needed for the job. Their competence (that was so personally hard and time consuming to obtain) becomes obsolete.

The other interesting thing is people who have worked in the same facility for their career have their competence field filled in for that facility. The competence issue only presents itself when they change jobs. They might be entirely competent with the equipment, tools and processes of their old job but might (will) have holes when presented with the new situation. Some of these holes can be dangerous because they are usually a surprise to the person themselves. In fact since the person was competent in his/her old position they develop a habitual way of thinking about themselves as competent and don't question it.

Where and how the training is positioned in the field is essential.

In the simplified diagram we can see 3 different trainings. It is important to realize that this discussion is independent of the quality of the trainer or of the training materials, the modality, even the willingness to learn (they can greatly help mitigate this problem but don't change it).

Training A is a review of knowledge and skills that the candidate already knows. There is a high probability of boredom since it cuts no new ground. Of course an excellent instructor and engaging materials will help but the tendency toward boredom is there.

Training B is material that is not connected to anything the candidate already knows. It is too advanced for this candidate without some preparatory work. Someone in this position is bored, frustrated, maybe annoyed (even at themselves for not knowing it or at the trainer, materials or company for not being clear). Like walking into an advanced class you will get very little out of the experience. As before a gifted instructor might be able to backfill enough material so the main topics make sense.

Of course training C is ideal. Some of the material is known to the candidate and all of the new material is linked to the areas of competence. Elementary school teachers, in their wisdom, repeat known materials as they transition into new topics. New topics are always tied to known topics and where the material is entirely new the teacher proceeds slowly and repeats often. Of course with a large classroom there will be boredom since some students will “get it” the first time and frustration because some students won’t even “get it” the 10th time.

Where does this leave us?

In the maintenance world we have to get over our fear and dislike of testing. Testing is important to show the field of competency. Without knowing what the candidate is competent in, training becomes a hit or miss proposition.

Firms usually train everyone in some course they think is important. This is like throwing mud at a wall and seeing what sticks. It does have the advantage of appearing “fair” and of not needing a lot of forethought. One advantage of experienced trainers is that they are used to this and can, to some extent, mitigate the problem

If we have scarce training dollars we need to know what competences are missing and aggressively go after them. Training this way is not easy and requires more effort from the staff for testing, training design and thinking. It also will not be fair since the goal is a full field of competence for a job, process or area which depends on where one has started from. In this model not everyone needs the same training so not everyone gets the same training.

The unanswered question is what competences are needed for a particular situation? That could be another whole discussion.

Any travel has a starting point (competencies needed for the job or area and the missing competencies of the candidate), a journey (the classes, OJT, readings, CBT, etc.) and an end point (ready to rock in the new role).

I invite your comments to illuminate more of this topic.

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