

What's Right with Those People?



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Our first issue (Fall 2006) advocates a proactive approach to conflict resolution training: leveraging the “teachable moments” when employees are open to learning and adopting new skills, and developing trust by listening carefully to their needs and concerns.

This issue advocates letting go in two respects. The first is yielding control while leading a course so trainees can direct their own learning. The second is allowing yourself to be judged by their performance on the job, not your performance in designing or delivering the course. The key to letting go is faith: believing in the conflict resolution skills you teach and the people you teach them to.

Moving Through Life Gracefully: Part I LEADERSHIP

Training is a fundamental function in a healthy workplace. Sometimes, though, we feel like we're getting the same things over and over again. One of the hallmarks of good training is to find new ways to present fundamental truths, and to suggest new perspectives on things – even though they may be things that your audience knows (or thinks it does).

One such “twist” on the familiar is the concept of “moving through life gracefully.” What the heck does that mean? I would suggest that it means two things – the first has to do with how one exercises leadership. The second is about how we live every day. In this issue of *The Resource* I will talk about the concept of graceful leadership. In the next, I will

bring moving through life gracefully into the realm of our everyday lives.

When I am leading a group, I try to remember that the most important thing is not to let it be about me. As a control freak and avid seeker of approval and affirmation, this requires quite a stretch. In many areas of my life, being regarded as right and smart is pretty much my *raison d'etre*. But when I am *leading* (generally training or facilitating), I am forced to relinquish the goal of being perceived as in charge. I am forced to recognize that the only way to be successful as a leader is by serving the group.

The concept of servant-leadership is certainly not new. Leaders

of work groups and facilitators of workplace meetings and supervisors of all descriptions are aware that there are many reasons to turn the focus off of them and onto the people who form the team – whatever shape it may take. And yet most of us are woefully inadequate to the task.

We are afraid that by voluntarily relinquishing “control” over a group or a team (as if we actually had any) we will be perceived as weak. We are afraid that if we allow the group to move at its own pace, or to be self-directed, we will not have earned the title of “leader” that they have given us. In short, we are afraid that something that we do will reflect badly on us.

This prevents us from “moving

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through life gracefully” because we are paralyzed by fear. We do not understand that what we *do* is not the same thing as who we *are*. I think the point can best be illustrated by a small example.

One night, some years ago, I had a date over for a lovely meal. I had made a delicious dish of rosemary chicken. I had rice pilaf and a salad and a delightful white wine. There were candles and a beautiful old lace tablecloth – I had gone all out. After my date had a few bites, he looked up and said, “you know, rosemary is not one of my favorite herbs...”

As you can imagine, I had several options in deciding how to receive that message. First, I could think he was just expressing his herbal preference and that he didn’t like rosemary. Next, I could think he didn’t like my chicken. At a deeper level, however, I would be quite likely to think he didn’t like my cooking and, at the heart of it, I could be quite convinced that he simply didn’t like me. (Anyone who has ever been foolish enough to criticize a dish someone has cooked knows that this is no exaggeration.) I, of course, decided it meant that he did not like me and, thus, the date was ruined. I was not able to separate what I had *done* (cooking chicken with rosemary – obviously a bad choice) with

who I *was* (and, therefore, I was obviously a bad person). My evening was ruined.

Many people reading this might think my date was simply foolish to tell me he didn’t like the herb. Let’s assume he didn’t. He comes back to dinner two weeks later and I fix the same thing because he seemed so pleased by it. He is now stuck – he can’t tell me this time that he doesn’t like it, because he didn’t tell me last time. We continue to date and he continues to eat Rosemary Chicken every couple of weeks, because he now simply cannot tell me the truth. We get married. Several years later he decides he simply must tell me – he can’t stand this dish one more time – and so he confesses “rosemary is not one of my favorite herbs...”. I leap up from the table, burst into tears, and run from the room – exclaiming that our marriage is a deception, based on a lie.

See? You can’t win. As long as you are committed to the belief that what you do is the same as who you are you will be stuck. There is never a right moment for my date (or husband, as the case may be...) to tell me that he doesn’t like rosemary – I have made it impossible because I have associated his herbal preference with how he feels about me.

While this example seems absurd (but, seriously, folks – when was the last time that criticizing someone’s cooking went well??), it serves to illustrate the basic fact that we are most often so wedded to what we have done that we don’t even recognize that we have attached our own self-worth to some minimal act.

In the workplace, this insistence that what we do is the same as who we are costs us dearly. We are afraid to make good decisions that are unpopular, because we want people to like us. We are afraid to be compassionate with our workers, because we are afraid people will perceive us as unfit to lead. We are afraid that anything we do will be seen as arrogance... or incompetence... or ... fill in the blank with your fear. We have confused what we do with who we are – and it keeps us from being the leaders we could be.

The hardest part of leading a group is keeping it from being about me. It all comes down to that.



Barbara Hulburt

Conflict Resolution Training: Aim High

The cardinal rule of organizational behavior is that what gets measured gets done. Applied to training, the means the criteria used to evaluate a course not only dictate how it is designed and delivered, they also shape how trainees interpret and apply the course content. This article discusses how three approaches to evaluation used by government agencies affect the extent to which conflict resolution training has a positive impact on the workplace.

Compliance

The purpose of many training courses is to comply with a statute, regulation, Executive Order, or agency directive that requires certain categories of employees to receive training on a

particular subject within a designated timeframe. These mandates rarely, if ever, require employees to retain or use the knowledge or skills conveyed to them. They require only that certain information be transmitted. As a result, agencies typically track only whether such transmission occurs.

One method is documenting content and attendance. For live training, this means ensuring that employees’ names appear on sign-in sheets, and that the video or PowerPoint slides they view and the manual they receive contain the requisite content. A second method for documenting the transmission of information is requiring employees to answer questions designed to test their comprehension of the material.

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Both methods provide a clear audit trail for proving compliance with a training mandate, but they reveal nothing about what employees do when they return to the workplace. As a result, these measures provide no incentive to provide quality training. The simplest and quickest ways to convey information are passive: requiring students to listen to a lecture, watch a video, or read materials on a website. Unfortunately, these are also the *least* effective methods for training adults.

In theory, testing would create a demand for quality, but in reality this often is not the case. Since the agency's goal is documenting compliance, it wants as high a pass rate as possible. Retraining, retesting, or, worse yet, having to discipline employees who fail tests is an administrative burden. The easiest ways to ensure a high pass rate are to teach to the test (stress the material covered in the questions) and to make the questions as easy as possible to answer.

If they are warned during a course that certain actions are illegal and could lead to prosecution, disciplinary action, or other adverse consequences, employees are likely to adjust their behavior accordingly regardless of how the course is evaluated. But if the course is intended in whole or in part to inspire rather than command certain behaviors, the agency's apparent lack of concern about what they do when they return to their workstations is likely to strongly influence employee behavior. The message that usually comes through loud and clear is that this course is just another bureaucratic interruption of their real work.

Reaction

Training in conflict resolution skills is often used to react to perceived problems in the workplace. If there are a lot of disputes, why not provide training in how to resolve them? If communication seems to be lacking or ineffective, communications training seems like a sensible response. Are lawyers and other agency personnel spending a lot of time or money on litigation? Training in negotiation or mediation skills might help.

The methods typically used to gauge the success of this type of training are attendance and participant feedback. At the end of the course, employees are asked to rate various aspects of the training. Participant evaluations provide an incentive to make a course enjoyable and provide valuable information about what participants like and dislike. But there is a serious downside to assuming that if employees like a course they will use what they learned in some beneficial way. Without any proof of a return on investment, it is hard to justify spending money on training. Many theoretically sound ideas fail to hold up in real world testing.

Furthermore, as is the case with compliance training, if an agency does not commit to measuring the impact of skills training on workplace behavior, employees may assume the agency is more concerned with "looking good" by reacting to a problem than it is with changing how things are done. Everyone in the federal sector has seen flavor-of-the-month initiatives that come and go faster than celebrity marriages.

Performance

An agency may commit to bettering its performance on a mission-related goal and determine that training is a means to this end. Training in conflict resolution skills may further such agency goals as reducing complaints or grievances; improving employee satisfaction or productivity; or lowering sick leave abuse, attrition, or transfer requests. Measuring the impact of conflict resolution training on employee performance creates a powerful incentive to provide top quality training. Measuring impact also makes it imperative to incorporate training into a comprehensive plan for promoting positive change.

If employees are tasked with achieving a goal and are informed that training will help them achieve it, they have a strong incentive to figure out how to apply the skills they learn productively. It all gets back to the simple rule that what gets measured gets done. If the measure of success for conflict resolution training is workplace performance, employees get the message that improving performance matters.

Since impact on a mission-related goal cannot be measured until well after a course ends, content, attendance, testing, and course evaluations are useful for ensuring a course is on track. Used as tools instead of goals, these measures can play a constructive role in promoting effective training.

The downside of measuring success by employee performance is the increased risk of failure. Content and attendance are a breeze to control, and good trainers can easily ensure that employees pass tests and review a course favorably. But staking your reputation on how others perform post-training may seem downright scary. Just remember there is tremendous power in letting go. If an agency demonstrates its belief in the skills it is teaching and the employees it is teaching them to by committing to measurable results, employees will strive to live up to expectations.

-Geoff Drucker

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