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Getting More Mileage out of Your “Corporate Education” Investment

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Each year corporate America spends tens of Billions on Education and Learning, or on efforts to improve the thinking and performance of its work forces. A 2002 American Society for Training and Development study showed the average U.S. Company spends between about 2 and 10 percent of total payroll on training. In 2003, a single large consulting firm spent over \$350 million on corporate learning. The payoff or ROI is difficult to quantify, but management lamentations about disappointing returns are all too familiar. Why is the return so lackluster? One reason is that too many corporate education expenditures are what I'd call *lazy purchases*. See the problem...write a check...fix them (*that is the people*).

When corporate America goes shopping for “education”, it can expect to acquire information, knowledge, or skill. Information is a product that is presented to the learning audience in the form of a speech, presentation, hand book, software program, etc. Knowledge is information that has been digested and internalized by an audience - it's what has been *learned*, and it has a greater value than information. Skill is the ability to behave or perform a task by employing knowledge. Information doesn't automatically become

knowledge; engagement is required. And knowledge doesn't automatically become skill; practice and feedback are required. Unfortunately, many training programs do not allow enough space and time for practice and feedback, so the most that can be accomplished is the acquisition of knowledge, or perhaps better still some genuine insight. But keep in mind that insights don't change anything; only actions do. We've all attended a compelling training session and read fantastic books that prompted insights which we were not able to translate into behavior change.

What are organizations really looking for? My observation is that they are often seeking not information or even knowledge, but rather judgment and wisdom. It is critical that employees have necessary knowledge, but it is much more important that they know when and how to apply that knowledge. Unfortunately, wisdom or judgment for our employees cannot be bought, and it will not be found in a classroom. Judgment and wisdom only come from experience...from living and experimenting with knowledge and skill over time. Even skill is difficult to purchase because it requires practice and feedback, and many training programs do not allow adequate time for this. One cannot learn how to fly a helicopter by

reading a book or even by having somebody tell you how to do it. There's no substitute for the experience being in the cockpit under the watchful eye of an instructor who can provide feedback. We already know this; but the same limitations apply to learning how to manage conflict, provide performance reviews, negotiate, give presentations, analyze spreadsheets, mentor employees, etc.

Given these challenges, are there steps management can take to significantly increase the value of its corporate education pursuits? You bet. Start with the following four thoughts.

1. Be clear about what you want.

Sometimes all you need is information dissemination and not necessarily behavior change. However, if you need behavior change or the introduction of a new skill, then you need to ensure an educational format that supports those objectives.

2. The only way to cultivate judgment and wisdom is to guide and participate in the experience of another. Doing so requires a greater commitment than simply authorizing the purchase of some training. This is precisely why effective mentoring and skillful coaching are so valuable. This is also why many of the best internal corporate education programs are staffed, at least in part, by the organization's own senior leadership. As a leader, you have to be there with the learners. Help them process and make sense of it their learning experience. Review lessons learned and breakdowns, explain future implications, and discuss application.

3. Education is difficult to evaluate for impact and outcomes (in other words for ROI). It's easy enough to rate an instructor, but what difference did the event make? What's the ROI? It will be difficult to gauge, especially if you haven't clarified the return you're seeking. Be

clear up front, and challenge your training people and educational partners to deliver a result instead of a program or curriculum. Vigorously evaluate their efforts. Why? Not to *expose* the ineffective training, but rather because your evaluation will help you learn what you need to continue zeroing in on your desired impact, and your raising the bar will prompt more creativity from your training resources.

4. Finally, and most important, leadership must be more thoughtful about how the organization creates venues for practice and application. Some training investments are altogether counter-productive because not only is there no venue for practice, but the organization's existing culture is inimical to it. A good example is sending employees to be trained in creativity or risk taking, and then punishing creative efforts or minor risks that do not pan out.

Remember that somebody who has just learned a skill is probably not yet an expert. There will be some awkwardness, and a need for testing, experimentation, and practice. Is the organization ready for this? Is management expecting experimentation and planning to reward it? I've met many mid-level executive clients who upon returning from multi-week intensive executive development programs discover that there is no way for them to apply their transformational "experience" and new awareness within the company's existing culture and system which remains set up to keep on doing what it's been doing. Not only is the training investment wasted, but worse still, the *trained* executive becomes disillusioned and may be worse off than before the training.

To get more out of your training investment, make sure your management team is asking the following questions:

With respect to our organization's culture, what existing modes of behavior will need to change in order to support the new learning? Do we need to change?

Are we, as leaders, modeling the desired behavior? Are we prepared to catch newly trained employees doing it right and reward and reinforce positive behavior? Are we leading by example? Where? How? How not? If not, shouldn't we be at the training too? Should we be helping to instruct?

The bottom line is that management cannot send employees to training and expect that they will return and change the organization. Leaders still have to lead.

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