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To Increase Productivity in Lean Times, Invest in Training

Problem-Solving Skills Improve Staff Performance

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Whether it's big corporations, mom-and-pop shops on the corner or the media units in holding companies, almost every business is trying to do more with less. Given the need to ratchet up productivity, it is logical that we should turn to the resources at our disposal and ensure we get as much from them as possible.

While media organizations pride themselves on tools and scale, their biggest resource is their people. There are two primary tactics businesses use to maximize staff productivity. The first is a simple balancing of people and tasks to arrive at a place where the fewest number of people can handle the workload. The second focuses on training staff to increase individual capabilities.

Unfortunately, today managers emphasize the need to get more productivity out of seemingly ever-shrinking staffs.

A corollary to this kind of thinking is that there is no place for serious training. The impression is that companies cannot afford the time and money it takes to seriously train their staff.

That's unfortunate, because training should be viewed as an investment, not a cost. Yes, training requires time and financial resources, both of which could be utilized somewhere else. But quality training pays long-term dividends that justify the short-term cost.

Restructuring tactics lead to immediate savings, but eventually lead to a frustrated and burned-out staff. If people don't flat-out leave, increased frustration can lead to stress and mistakes-increasing counterproductivity. If staff members do leave, costs are incurred in the form of lost client experience and time lost in training replacement staff.

Beyond Basics

Every media organization worth its salt has an established training regimen that does a good job of covering basics for its younger staff members. These programs convey facts, concepts and processes important for planners to understand to do their jobs. The programs fall short by stopping at those basics. They fail to take the training to the next level; to go beyond basic media principles and endeavor to turn planners into efficient problem-solvers and to grow as individuals.

The old fishing metaphor illustrates the potential productivity increase that comes from a staff of good problem-solvers: "Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime." When we're crunched for time, it's much easier to quickly solve planners' problems or tell them where to look to find the answer. In that way, we can more quickly get back to our own tasks. But when we do that, we are training young people to come to us to solve their problems, putting pressure on us and not helping them understand how to solve problems independently.

I once had a planner come to me after discovering a discrepancy in a monthly budget report. Rather than just identify the problem's source and correct the error, we both sat down and started the resolution problem from scratch. Where exactly was the discrepancy? What components affected that line item? Had we looked at each individual component? If the problem was in this component, what specific aspect caused the problem?

The exercise quickly led us to the solution. But the revelation for the planner wasn't in that solution; it was in the knowledge that there was a straightforward approach that he could use to get to the source of a problem and that he could use the approach for many things, not just budget discrepancies.

Investing the time to teach the diligence of problem-solving freed up more time later for me that I might normally spend answering questions. It also had a positive impact on that particular planner, who became one of the most creative problem-solvers in our unit.

This methodology goes a long way toward raising planners' confidence levels. Furthermore, it moves the equation from one in which two people often work together on solving one problem to one in which two people can each solve a different problem. When two problems are solved simultaneously, that is increased productivity.

Right Kind of Motivation

If a planner isn't motivated, the best training available won't generate peak productivity. Planners will be motivated by what is important to them, not what is important to the organization. So those responsible for training must consider the consumer's perspective. In this case, the consumer is the planner.

To maximize training, it is critical for trainers to put themselves in the planner's shoes. Planners want to accomplish goals. They want to gain experience, responsibility and a better paycheck. Trainers need to consider what level of skill the planner has and

what he or she should focus on to reach the next level, framing guidance in a way that helps planners understand the importance of growing in certain directions.

A junior planner who does a good job has a sense about how much his or her work is valued and won't be too shy to come in and ask for a promotion on the basis of that value. That is a conversation that inevitably puts the supervisor on the spot, ending up in a discussion of "why not" instead of "how to."

Those responsible for training should pay careful attention to ensure that they address the "how to" so planners know exactly what the payoff is for following direction and learning new skills.

This is especially true as planners begin to take on supervisory responsibilities. Productive planners have achieved a solid grounding in the skills they need to be solid media people. But a successful transition to supervisory levels requires learning a more emotional skill set that younger planners have to cultivate.

At supervisory levels, focus shifts from doing things to leading people. People are ruled by emotions. Any supervisor who cannot understand, accommodate and manage emotions will fail no matter how good he or she is at getting tasks done. It becomes extremely important for supervisors to point out what is needed to be successful to those planners hoping to move up the career ladder. In doing so, the supervisor will not only have given the maturing planner insight into necessary but also will have helped make that planner a much more productive contributor.

Planner Involvement

It is also important for planners to take an active role in their own growth process. Supervisors should encourage planners to ask questions and request feedback. In doing so, planners become proactive rather than passively waiting to be instructed what to do. Not only does active participation help planners learn to be better problem-solvers, it generates feedback a supervisor can use to better tailor training.

Scaling back and restructuring may not be the best tactics available to increase the productivity of today's media staff. While it may take more time and patience to provide deeper training, the result is a planning staff less likely to rely on supervisors for answers, better able to think independently, less likely to make mistakes and more motivated. When a staff is better trained and highly motivated, it's more productive.

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