

“Thank God and Greyhound, She’s Gone,” (to a Workshop), and Other T&D Matters

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“No workshops!” That’s my admonition to students in management class when I ask them to develop a “90-day Action Plan” for an imaginary problem employee. That plan, broached during their hypothetical one-on-one performance appraisal meeting, is to help the employee get back on track or, lacking improvement, to help assess further remediation and build documentation for disciplinary action.

Why make workshops verboten? When a workshop is prescribed to remedy something other than a technical shortcoming—especially problems like poor teamwork, ineffective communication, resistance to change, bad attitudes, or lack of leadership—it is often both a cop-out and a vain hope—active avoiding.

Instead of the supervisor’s committing to work with the employee, he sends her to someone else to deal with. I’ve discovered the weaker the action plan, the more likely there’s a workshop in the picture. By weak I mean a plan in which the supervisor makes himself scarce after the one meeting with the problem staffer. Instead of a daily check-in, scheduled interactions may be two weeks or more apart. And, when I ask the supervisor/student if they’ve explained to the staff member why she is being sent to the workshop and what is expected, the “Well, ah . . . not really” response suggests more than a little avoidance.

In the real work world, the problem staff member may well regard being sent as a reward (an unsupervised day off—hallelujah!)—likely, her coworkers will see it that way—or she may suspect vaguely that it’s a punishment for which she has been unjustly singled out, adding to her growing perplexity about why this job sucks. The truly troubled might even see it as hitting the jackpot with their bad behavior, a definite reason not to change anything.

Also, it is slightly delusional to think that a problem staff member will be charmed out of an ingrained pattern of behavior by attending a six hour class.

The workshop facilitator likely has no idea about participant backgrounds, the circumstances of their being there, or what each of them is hoping to accomplish. At best, the leader may succeed in engaging the dysfunctional employee and temporarily alleviating the burden of that

chip on the shoulder. As a result, she may learn something about herself and make a change or two; however, what she learns may have nothing to do with the action plan.

Is this avoidance phenomenon limited to students? Apparently not. Invariably, a few workshop participants—real supervisors—when developing next steps for a problem staffer in a small group activity, do exactly what the students do: Call Greyhound! What is encouraging is that other participants question that action step—priceless coaching!—and suggest more direct ways to help the problem employee.

As a workshop leader I’ve come to believe that “Those Who Are Sent” (the TWAS) stubbornly resist learning, regardless of how well the workshop is designed. Worse is that their alienation can impede others from learning, not to mention the skewing of the overall workshop experience.

I like to kid about a nightmare workshop scenario: facilitating a “Bad Attitudes” session for a room full of surly TWAS!

My country song title for this column derives from the TWAS phenomenon. The supervisor is thankful in the short term: it’s a day off from the person making his job miserable! If timed right, the workshop is on a Friday, so the relief extends into the weekend. And, the supervisor can report to his boss that he has taken action: the problem person is at a workshop! Of course, unlike the song’s one-way meaning, this Greyhound ticket is roundtrip.

The Workshop Triangle

My musings about the TWAS phenomenon are by way of introduction to every facilitator’s question: Why do some training and development (T&D) workshops sizzle and why do some fizzle?



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Surely, a workshop's falling flat is not always the result of a roomful of TWAS. Nor can boorish behavior—persistent tardiness, cell phoning, and bored disengagement all come to mind—by a few participants be blamed totally for a workshop that flops. That kind of annoying behavior distracts but does not occlude learning.

From what I hear from the people who manage regional T&D programs for librarians, numerous workshops struggle to “make”; they fail to attract enough participants to cover costs and are canceled—even sessions facilitated by well-known names. Why?

Every workshop has at least three interdependent parts: the participants, the facilitator, and the design or agenda for the day. Like a triangle, a weak side can cause a cave-in, a collapse. If participants come to be entertained and become resentful when asked to think, the day can be a loss. The best workshops are not a spectator sport—they are a contact sport. You are a player. Unlike a cruise where the crew caters, the best workshops are a windjammer adventure in which you hoist sails and mop decks, help in the galley, and keep a bright-eyed watch in the early hours. This type of workshop can panic participants who come to chill out.

And, if the facilitator is superficially prepared, arrogant, or bored, or if the design is not what the participants want, the outcome won't be much better.

The room or venue in which the workshop takes place needs mention. While ideally neutral, a workshop's success or failure can be enhanced or degraded by the quality of the venue. Inadequate sound proofing, equipment failures, extreme temperatures, and shabby furnishings all contribute to the experience. While workshops can succeed despite these limitations, a failing workshop will fail more miserably. If the room temperature is in the mid-eighties, the quality of the learning is going to be less than it could be regardless of the brilliance of the participants and facilitator.

The organizational culture surrounding the workshop triangle adds more complexity. Indirectly enough, I've picked up on what seems like a profession-wide ambivalence, even skepticism, about T&D, particularly when it comes to workshops on change, facilitation, management and supervision, teamwork, and leadership. For short, let's term this management T&D.

Is the librarian's apparent lack of interest in management T&D due to the fact that much of it is derived from the world of business? I have encountered more than a little disdain for business models—of any sort—among librarians, suggesting a tacit acceptance of the dominant and potentially stifling bureaucratic model. An expert in staff development told me: “Librarians don't seem able to generalize from other professions to their own—I'm not sure why!”

A colleague tells me that the statement, “libraries should be run more like a business,” evokes an antiquated image of a Theory X business world, so popular in movies

from the 1940s and 1950s. Even today the phrase may result in stark images of “Chainsaw Al” Dunlap gleefully handing out pink slips in the corporate parking lot or of Jack Welch's heartless annual “rank and yank” staffing purges at GE.

Those miserable images overshadow the progress made by humanistic businesses. When someone calls for not-for-profits to be more like a business, they may be recommending the delegation of decision making to the level where the work gets done to cut through the red tape and other bureaucratic folderol. They may be for empowering—genuinely—and rewarding staff at all levels to deliver the best kind of service to our users. They may be recommending that all leaders make judicious decisions about resources, using qualitative and quantitative methods.

While some companies espouse “greed is good” and much else that is dodgy, there are some businesses with humanistic and positive values that are relevant to libraries. It is to those companies and what they do to succeed that we should look for inspiration to improve our workforce. Their T&D programs are well worth our understanding and emulating.

As you may recall in my Unstodgy Airline column, T&D never stops at Southwest Airlines; they abide by their credo: hire attitude, train for skills.¹ Southwest invests significant dollars annually into weeks of training for everyone, and the training is not only about operating procedures and industry regulations; it is about customer service, teamwork, and leading.

Corporations like Southwest seem to understand better than we do that investing in people is the best way to improve service.

Still, many librarians are dubious about the purpose of any management training. At the start of every semester, I hear it from my students: “Why do we have to take this management class? I will never be a manager.” My explanation, that the course will help them understand being managed, gives them something to think about even if they still don't want to be there. They take the required course and are often pleased by its relevance to their work lives and what they can do to help themselves be better managed or, maybe even be better managers.

More worrisome to me is that many perfectly able midcareer librarians are not drawn toward management. A librarian colleague told me why management holds little excitement for her and her circle of midcareer librarians: “Management jobs are more stressful than satisfying. We don't have any happy, effective manager role models.” In other words, the prevalent hierarchical pecking-order style of organization—in which these librarians function—is a turn-off for our best line librarians. Nor are they interested in management workshops.

On occasion I hear from participants that “those who would benefit the most”—they mean their administrators—are not in the workshop, one they found especially relevant. The administrators may well believe they already

know management and leading and teamwork, and implementing change, etc. I suppose these are the TWANTs: “Those Who Are Not There,” and, who, according to their subordinates, just might benefit from having their assumptions challenged. And, if the workshop is the type that mixes and matches numerous small groups it is a powerful camaraderie builder. The TWANTs regular absence is a missed opportunity and a less-than-positive-indicator of how much support they may offer for practicing workshop learnings.

Leaders and T&D

Maybe one’s level of support for T&D all comes down to a personal belief: T&D does good, or, T&D is a waste. It does seem that either a person has faith in T&D or believes the concept simply not worthwhile. No evidence persuades you otherwise. You either believe it works or it doesn’t.

Count me in with the believers, with eyes wide open. I too have sat through sessions conducted by facilitators who had no experience with or in-depth understanding of the concepts they were glibly espousing. And, management T&D can be faddish, even disingenuous, with simplistic metaphors and claims for improvements that are as intangible as the “vaporware” one hears about in information technology.

Yet I have experienced personal growth through T&D, and I have seen a few organizations improve in tangible ways. In fact, I have always learned from workshops, good or bad. If they have been less than ideal, I’ve gained ideas from critically thinking on how I would present the concept. Invariably I benefit from other participant views.

The effective leader, one who is trying to improve an organization, will benefit from an established T&D program. I have seen too many effective leaders try to bring along staff toward a new model of organization without providing the necessary training to help that staff follow

alongside. From personal experience, I support the idea of more T&D than less. When I was involved in a major reform to move a rigidly structured library to a loosely knit organization, we made good progress but not as much as we could have had we invested more in T&D. We made progress because the leader was clear about his vision and he gave permission to the staff to make decisions for improvement. Mistakes were opportunities to learn, not occasions for punishment. Where we came up short in the reform was in not fully infusing a shared vision and values. T&D might have helped get us to the next level. Instead our T&D was highly episodic, perhaps less so than the once-a-year Staff Development Day in many libraries, but not consistent enough, delivered to enough people, or delivered by the best trainers.

While I am calling for more T&D, the library’s executive correspondingly has to want a new model of organization to achieve tangible goals. If the executive is comfortable with the current model—the “before”—then no amount of T&D will change anything organization-wide, beyond some ephemeral personal growth among participants. Without the leader’s support, newly hatched organizational ideas will fly only so far, caged in by the status quo.

Worse, tantalizing staff with new models and concepts of organization, while continuing with the “same old, same old,” suggests a mere academic interest, not the seeking of practical applications. Staff quickly figure out, with increasing discouragement, that regardless of the models illuminated in T&D, the status quo will prevail.

Truly effective leaders embrace the opportunity and the obligation to use T&D with firm and realistic outcomes in mind, to budget for T&D, and to participate in learning alongside others.

References

1. John Lubans, Jr., “Southwest: the Un-stodgy Airline” *LA&M* 20, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 142-46.