

Avoiding “The Sheep Dip”

It is a sad fact that many employees are still being subjected to the age old training ritual of “sheep dipping”. This is a process by which employees are “refreshed”, “cleansed” and “re-invigorated” by ensuring they attend set training courses or, perhaps, are placed on the ubiquitous “refresher” course. This refresher course is, of course, necessary, because most employees forget what they have learned on similar courses that they had been previously on. Do they?

Companies just love “the sheep dip”. Easy to create, easy to administer and can cut costs. Simply, get your Training Department to devise a list of courses that link to the company’s priority capability areas; decide who needs what training; tell which employees to go on what course, and then give everyone a “big pat on the back” for achieving the Training and Development Plan. Easy! But beware!

The “Sheep Dip” process can be flawed in the following ways:

1. The list of training courses that are provided can remain static from one year to the next. Has your business not moved on? Are the courses that you provided two to three years ago still valid? Are there not new skills emerging from one year to the next? A yearly audit of the skills and capabilities that are needed to deliver the company business plan must be done and the range of training offerings must be tailored, “chopped and changed” and added to if necessary. Employees’ skills must be kept up to date in order to keep competitive advantage.
2. The Line Manager decides to have no input into the “sheep dip”. All they do is send the employee through the process and then “tick the box” that says: “I have you developed my Employees?” Managers have to take ownership of what training interventions are provided and also of the standard of these interventions. Many managers when confronted with a list of training course options go no further than checking that a particular course seems OK for their employee. They do not analyse the content and the standard of the course. Of course, many would say that is not their responsibility and that those in the Training Department should be the people responsible. Do they not care what standard of training their employees get?
3. Staying with Managers. After having decided which course an employee should go on, how many managers actually sit down with employees to work out learning objectives before the course? How many will check the progress of an employee through a development programme? How many will sit down with the employee after the course or programme, review how they fared with their learning objectives, and then agree an action plan for implementation of the skills learned on the course?
4. The “Sheep Dip” is very rarely measured. How many Training Departments actually measure the effectiveness of their training interventions? What impact are these interventions making on the competency development and the

productivity of the employee being “sheep dipped”? Sure, the department, or external training provider, will have plenty of “happy sheet” feedback but what about the bottom line? Is the company getting a return on its investment in training?

5. The “refresher” course mentality has to be eliminated. If an employee needs a “refresher” course on skills that they should be using in their everyday work, then their original course did not deliver what it promised. This could have arisen through the standard of the content, the trainer, or through the employee’s application on the course. It may be that the wrong employee went on the wrong course! Whose responsibility sits with each of these areas? The Line Manager! There may be instances whereby an employee went on a course that was relevant to their role at the time and perhaps they go on secondment to another job where the skills are different. If they then go back to their old role, then perhaps a “refresher” type course is needed but big questions should be asked if someone who is still in the same role has to attend a “refresher”! I know of some manager colleagues who are on their third coaching course! Same content, same methods, same models. Return on Investment??
6. Finally, the “sheep dip” can be very de-motivating for some employees. No change from one year to the next and no innovation or creativity being exhibited by the company can lead the employee to think that the future success of the company could be in doubt. Do they want to stay with such a company? Also, if the line manager takes little responsibility for the true development of their employees and abdicates all training and development responsibility to the Training Department, then the employee will quickly become disillusioned with the lack of support and encouragement. Their skills will not improve as quickly as they should, either.

5 Steps to Avoid a “Sheep Dip” Mentality

1. Ensure Training and Development is high on the corporate agenda. The Training and Development Plan is as important as the overall Business Plan. Without the T&D plan the capabilities needed to deliver the full potential of the Business Plan will not be developed.
2. Do a full audit of the training and development interventions that the company presently provides (and also that of external providers) and ensure that these interventions are exactly what’s needed. Choose external consultants carefully and continue to develop the capabilities of internal trainers. Take the time to adapt, chop and change old course materials and methods.
3. Make sure that all line managers are made responsible and accountable for developing their staff. In addition to making sure that they source training interventions for their staff, managers must also be aware that they should have an input into the training process by challenging course content, capability of trainers and by taking time with their employees before, during and after the training.

4. Put measurements in place, which will enable you to calculate a return on your training investment. Measure improvements in competency and where possible, bottom line results such as sales etc.
5. Review your Training and Development Plan on a regular basis. Not yearly – at least every quarter.

When was the last time you reviewed your training plan? Still “sheep dipping”?

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