

THE SCHNEIDER REPORT

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Welcome to the Schneider Report,

It's a new year, a new decade and for many financial institutions it's time to assess and address the status of their sales and service organization. While our focus is on consulting, training, coaching and metrics in the field of sales, service and sales management, the following article may be applied to almost any area of your organization.

Tom Bresnan and Mike Shallenberger, CEO and EVP of Schneider Sales Management, respectively, have collaborated on this edition of the Schneider Report. Their expertise and leadership in "all things training" is compiled from over 50 years combined experience from information technology to sales and service training projects. The resulting article has incorporated the common threads and best practices drawn from hundreds of training initiatives.

The Eight Keys to a Successful Training Initiative

Training initiatives produce an extremely wide range of outcomes. A well-executed initiative creates tremendous value for an organization. Productivity increases. Sales and profits grow. Employees respect for management grows, job satisfaction increases and turnover declines. Customers see real change and become more loyal. On the other hand, a poorly-executed initiative has far-reaching negative consequences. Precious budget dollars are wasted. Valuable staff time is wasted. Management loses credibility and fails to demonstrate that performance improvement is taken seriously. Employees leave and everyone wonders why. Customer satisfaction and customer retention statistics painfully decline.

The differences between the upside of a successful training initiative and the downside of a failed training initiative are so large and important that, very simply, management has to get it right and failure is not an option. The good news is that success is attainable by all organizations, not just the loftiest or largest, through some pragmatic, common sense approaches. The path to success is found through a combination of the right strategy, a solid plan and, most importantly, execution and commitment from your leaders.

Here are our eight keys to a successful training program:

1. Conduct a Thorough Assessment

It is not really about training, but rather it is about effecting change. Figure out what needs to change first and then identify all aspects of the organization that are affected by that change. Do that through an objective, realistic evaluation of your people, your technology, your products, your operating policies and your processes. Know your culture and its capacity and readiness for change. If you

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will be selecting a training vendor for your initiative, make sure that the vendor is capable of completing or assisting in the assessment process. Make sure the training is tailored to address your greatest opportunities for change and that it is delivered to the employees who are at the center of those opportunities. For tangible and sustainable results, do not accept generic, “feel good” training that is not linked to specific improvements or some measurement of results.

2. Support of Senior Management

Executive management has to get out in front of the training initiative and show support. They must believe in its value and share that belief through formal and informal communication. If senior management openly talks about the importance of the project with enthusiasm and conviction, that enthusiasm and conviction cascades throughout the entire organization. There is nothing more powerful than a “C”-level leader playing a visible role in the launch and kick-off of the initial training sessions by discussing what the organization is trying to accomplish and why it is important, and then seeking feedback from employees after training.

3. Engagement of Front Line Managers

While executive management has to demonstrate support, front line managers are your key participants. It is through their staff that an organization gets the biggest impact. Front line managers are at the point of attack for the performance improvements the organization is looking for. Thus, their input is needed to help shape the project by identifying where and how things need to improve. They need to be strong advocates for the value of the initiative and be authentic about it. They need to support their staff as they go through the training. They need to be prepared to reinforce the training and provide effective coaching to their staff after the training is done and everyone is back to their day-to-day routines. Front line managers often need to improve their own management and coaching skills in order to enable them to leverage the training their staffs are receiving. We find that training the managers first, before training is rolled out to the rank-and-file, works best as it shapes the message around the entire initiative, strengthens their commitment to the program, plus gives them the additional managerial skills needed to sustain the results.

4. The Right Project Manager

Training initiatives, like all projects, work best when there is one “go-to” project manager. That person has to be given the authority and tools to get the job done. They need to be respected enough in the organization to influence line managers and be a credible advocate of the initiative. They need to work well with any outside vendors you use and leverage what those vendors bring to the table. We’ve seen some institutions pull together a task force from different departments. Task forces are OK as long as there is one person who can lead that group and act on its behalf. Who is this person, typically? We have seen that it does not matter

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whether the person comes from a line management role, human resources or your existing training staff. What does matter is their passion, focus and commitment, organizational skills and communication skills.

5. Spend Wisely

Everyone relates to the old adage, “Anything worth doing is worth doing right.” Once you have figured out what you want to accomplish, you can then figure out how much you should budget for the initiative and what value or return on investment can be generated for your organization. Too often people have grand plans, but a shoestring budget. Cutting too many corners or shrinking an initiative to the point where the training can’t make an impact ends up wasting money and time. It does take a commitment, in both funds and people’s time, to get training done right. But spending more does not guarantee success. Poor planning, vague objectives and no follow through will result in more money spent, but spent on a broken project and with zero payback. Spend less by knowing what you want to accomplish. Use trusted vendors who understand your objectives, collaborate with you and truly partner with you. A true partner delivers what you need, at a fair price and is as passionate about the success of the program as you are.

6. Make It Real and Interactive

Training needs to be “real world” and challenging. It cannot be abstract and theoretical, but has to be built around realistic situations that employees actually deal with in the day-to-day performance of their jobs. Also, one size does not fit all. So, avoid content that is delivered to a broad audience, but is specific to only a few people in the audience. The more job-specific the training is, the greater the impact will be. Lastly, minimize lecture and maximize activity and participation. The days of lecturing from the platform are over. Adult learners retain knowledge and improve their skills through performing activities, role playing and sharing ideas back-and-forth with peers.

7. Post-training Follow Up

Organizations that are highly effective in conducting training initiatives provide a framework for coaching and reinforcement of training content so that employees actually implement their learned skills and behavior in the workplace. Make sure your front line managers are prepared to immediately reinforce new skills and behaviors when employees come back from training. We find that having employees set written learning goals prior to training and improvement goals during the training session increases their focus during training.

8. Evaluation

Well-planned training programs identify key metrics and establish performance improvement goals before the training begins, and then provide a framework for post-training evaluation. If there is no measurement of performance and out-

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comes, then there is no accountability for learning and change, and no chance of making the desired impact. Evaluate the use of preferred behaviors, assess skill and knowledge retention, measure revenue and/or cost savings, and determine the overall return on investment for the training initiative.

Thanks for your time, please feel free to give us your feedback on this article or about topics that you would like us to address in future volumes. As always, please call or email if you would like to view past Schneider Reports or discuss specific improvements to your organization.

Here's to a great 2010!

About the Authors

Tom Bresnan is CEO and President of Schneider Sales Management, LLC. He has extensive background in general management, training and sales management.

Michael Shallenberger is Executive Vice President & Director of Consulting Services for Schneider Sales Management, LLC, a position he has held for the past eleven years. Michael will complete his M. Ed. in Adult Training & Education from Colorado State University in 2010. He graduated summa cum laude from Metropolitan State in Denver, Colorado with a B.S. in Organizational Change Management and holds an A.S. degree in Banking and Personal Finance. Michael is also an alumnus of the Pacific Coast Graduate School of Banking.



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