

# Six Top Questions Leaders Ask About Developing Their Key Talent

*By Rebecca Morgan, CSP, CMC*

Speaking to leaders I've learned that they want to know how to best develop their key staff members. The most common solution they know is to send folks to 1- to 3-day training sessions, or to conferences. They know those get minimal, if any, return on the time and money invested, but they're not clear what other options are available which would have a higher, and longer-term ROI.

They want to know how to best maximize their investment in growing their people. They ask excellent questions. Here are six of the best frequently asked questions, along with my responses.

## **1. How can I discern the good training brochures and proposals from those that aren't?**

In the program description, look at the objectives, "this program is for you if..." and/or "at the end of this program, you will be able to..." and determine if that fits your target person/group.

Does the program provider offer any pre-assessment to determine if the session would be valuable or your target person/group? (Many computer classes offer at least a rudimentary assessment that asks questions like "How comfortable are you with setting up a style sheet in Word?" "Do you know how to send blind carbon copies in Outlook?") These pre-assessments help you determine if a session is aimed at the right level for your learner. Ask the target person to answer the questions and have his/her boss answer them based on their experience of observing the person. (Obviously, the boss won't be able to answer all the questions.)

The boss and the target attendee should jointly decide if a session would be worth taking, and decide on some ways the attendee can demonstrate new competencies when returning to work.

The most valuable programs will have built-in accountabilities, follow up, and pre- and post-session measures. You're probably only going to get these on custom-designed programs for your specific organization. And yes, it will cost more than sending someone to a one- or two-day session. But you will get far more ROI if the program is built to include all the right pieces for sustained learning.

It's like buying a house. You could buy a pre-assembled home that has a roof, floor, walls, kitchen, bathroom, etc. and would be inhabitable. Or, you could custom build a house that you know is going to give you exactly what you want for the long term. The latter will take some time and thought, and costs more, but it doesn't have to take your life savings. And you will probably be a lot happier with something that is built around

your specific wants/needs. And working with the architect or builder you can make modifications along the way that will ensure you'll get what you want to be happy.

## **2. How do I pick the training options that are most relevant? Which training will impact my business/department the most?**

Here are some questions to ask yourself and your senior team:

- Which skills could add value to our bottom line – sales, technology, management?
- Where are we having the most problems – management, communication, customer service, project management?
- In what areas do our key people need to grow to get us to our 6-month, 1-year, 2-year goals? Finance, sales, marketing, management, technical skills?

Put your focus, time and money toward the most critical of these issues.

## **3. How can I justify the cost of training (ROI)? How can we track the results of training?**

You justify the cost of any development effort by measuring the areas for improvement before and after that effort, then 6 months afterward. Always be raising the bar for yourself and your staff to perform more effectively.

Measurable results can include:

- Reduced turnover per organization and manager
- Increase in promotions per managers' department
- Reduced scrap/rework
- Reduced customer complaints
- Higher customer satisfaction ratings per person and/or department and/or shift
- Fewer grievances
- More sales per person/department/shift
- Higher profit margin
- Higher percentage of quotes/bids/RFPs accepted
- Fewer lost customers
- More new customers
- Higher average profit per employee or customer
- Higher average or actual revenue per employee or customer
- Increased repeat business
- Reduced absenteeism
- Reduced injuries/higher safety record

#### **4. How can I have a plan to develop my people (create a career path)?**

Start with assessing the individual's current strengths and areas of needed improvement (use a 360 degree feedback tool, or something similar). Then decide where s/he and you want these skill levels to be in 6 months, 1 year, 2 years. Where is the gap? How do they need to perform differently to step up to new responsibilities or keep growing with the company?

In partnership with the target person/group, determine some ways to help them get there. A mentor/coach might be appropriate, or a long-term development program, or some specialized classes, with accountability to show integration of the new skills/knowledge.

All growth paths do not need to lead to management as the end result. Have a non-management growth path. Individual contributors can grow within their class without having to take on management responsibilities. Many don't want those responsibilities, but think that's the only career growth plan available.

#### **5. How can I (or someone in my company) think like a training manager?**

Actually, I usually talk to training managers about how to think like a CEO! CEOs are bigger-picture, long-term strategic thinkers, while training managers are often short-term, tactical thinkers. So take your natural inclination, long-term, strategic thinking, and apply it to your best resource – people. Write your answers to these questions:

- Who do we need to be working here in 6 months, 12 months, 2 years to get us to our goals? (Think skills, not names of individuals.)
- What are the skills, talents, knowledge and attitudes we need to have in place now to get us where we need to be?
- What are the skills, talents, knowledge and attitudes we need to have present at each of the 6-month milestones?
- Where are the gaps with the skills and talent we currently have and where we want to be?
- Who would be the candidates to start with, who are most receptive and hungry for opportunity? Who would we start with to give us the best return from the investment in their growth?
- How will we know our people are acquiring the skills to get us to our goals? What benchmarks can we look at to determine this (see measures from previous question)?
- How can we grow our people to the next level? What's our plan? Who can we get to come help us design the best route, and make this manageable?

- What are we willing to invest to grow our people and company?

## 6. What should be the role of the CEO or department head in training/development?

- Be a role model. Always be working on your own processes, skills, knowledge, and practices. Don't just give learning lip service. Find ways to enhance your own skills, not by taking a "seminar" which is really just a golf outing. Be committed to your own continuous improvement by seriously working on yourself. Hire a coach/mentor.
- Be a cheerleader. Challenge others to constantly be improving. Offer coaching/mentoring to your key talent. Notice when people are trying new skills, even if they aren't good at it yet. Compliment their efforts. Read – and have your managers read – "A Manager's Gardening Guide to Growing People" at <http://www.RebeccaMorgan.com/articles5.html>.
- Show up for in-house training, even if it's just to kick it off. Your presence says volumes about the importance of this development effort. Say a few words on why the participants' attendance is important to you, the company, and to them. Say what you expect to see shift as a result of their implementing the ideas in this program, and how you're going to look for those who really take on applying new skills and ideas. Read "How to Get the Biggest ROI from Your Department Training" at <http://www.RebeccaMorgan.com/articles5.html>.
- Make your staff (and yourself) accountable for improving themselves and their team. To know how to do this, read "The Three-Legged Stool for Training Success" at <http://www.RebeccaMorgan.com/articles5.html>.

Developing your key talent takes thought, planning, time, effort and some money. But the alternative — not developing your key staff—may kill your business. Don't put off this important effort just because it may not seem urgent. (See "Kill Your Business by Ignoring This Issue" at <http://www.RebeccaMorgan.com/articles5.html>.)

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