

REP: Utilizing the Rational/Emotional/Physical Approach for Effective Employee Training

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For years, companies have invested incredible amounts of time, money and energy in employee training. Despite this effort, one big question remains; what is the return on the investment for all this training? For the most part this question has gone unanswered.

What is the goal? For most companies the goal of training is to achieve one of the following: Either influence what the audience knows...or influence what the audience does. The problem arises when we begin to make assumptions that classroom training can do either one of these effectively. For example, if a class is being conducted in order to influence what an employee knows, has there been consideration as to the various learning styles of the audience and the fact that much of what has been presented will be forgotten within 24 to 72 hours? For organizations that are providing training in order to influence what people do...has there been consideration to the fact that what they might be trying to influence is a longstanding behavior or the fact that the work environment doesn't support the desired change? While it is hard to measure training effectiveness, it is possible to put a process in place that will help insure that the training does what it was intended to do: influence knowledge and influence actions.

This is where REP comes in; The Rational, Emotional and Physical approach to training.

Rational: Imagine that employees have been told to be in the training room at a particular time for mandated training. It is the same training they received last year and following that training nothing really changed so their expectation (rightfully so) is that nothing will change again as a result of this training. This thought pattern leads to a belief that conducting this training is not terribly rational since the wasted time could be better spent on production issues. Now imagine that the class is on body mechanics...teaching the audience how to lift safely. Imagine that I am a person sitting in the class that has been lifting the same way for years and have never experienced a back problem. Someone is standing at the front of the room telling me how to do something completely differently from the way I do it now without any problems. Do you think this will seem rational to me, and will the fact that it seems less than rational have an impact on the effectiveness of the training?

Emotional: It is not unusual for employees to look at training from the perspective of "what's in it for me?"...and it is the responsibility of the company to figure out a way to accommodate this perspective if they are hoping to get the greatest impact from the training... Look at it this way. When your organization sells products to your clients you don't hope that the client is capable of determining on their own what is in it for them if they buy your product. You have a marketing

department designed to help them see that your product has great value to them... The marketing department's job is to make sure that potential customers want what you are selling and that it will be abundantly clear to them what is in it for them if they do. With employees (our customers in the safety world), we present a product that they don't think they need, we often package it poorly (boring, irrelevant, uninteresting) and then we leave them on their own to determine what is in it for them! Every employee knows what is in it for management when training is conducted. It is to make sure that employees are compliant and to try to save money by reducing injuries. Most employees don't believe that the reason the company wants to save money is so that the company can take the savings and distribute it equally to all the employees! It is true that there are numerous employees who understand the value of training and take the information to heart and apply it to their day to day activities. The problem is that it only takes a few who do not to create a high risk environment.

Physical: Lets now assume that as an employee I have attended a training session, heard great information and am heading back to work. The final question is this: does the work environment support the information that was just presented. Let's go back to the lifting training example. If I attend the class, go back to work and begin lifting the old, demanding way, does anyone approach me to correct the behavior or does it go relatively unnoticed? This is an environment that does not support the change. Not only does no one say anything to the person, but the actual task they are performing quite possibly makes what was presented in the class difficult at best and impossible at worst.

Here's the point. How often do companies prepare for a new training program by asking themselves if the audience will perceive the information as rational, the audience will recognize what is in it for them and has an environment been created that supports the information that was presented. Without these questions being asked we will never know if the training reached its potential, and if the answer to these questions is "NO" it is safe to assume that the training definitely fell short of the desired return-on-investment.

Utilizing REP for high impact training

Rational:

Here is an example of how I might go about putting together a training program for employees. Prior to the event I will go out and talk with select employees about the training that is coming and how they think it might influence their jobs and the way they are performed. I then give them a little of the information I will be presenting and ask them for their thoughts (i.e.; does it make sense, is it useful, etc.) along with ideas for information they think I should include. The point is this...when I am introducing the class to the audience; the first thing I can say to them is "thanks to many of you for helping me put this content together". The class already feels for rational to the audience because they have had a direct influence on its content. My philosophy of training has always been this "if you want to hear a great idea...have one. If you want to hear a terrible idea, listen to anybody else". The more involved you can have the audience before the training begins, the more rational it will seem to them. Don't be afraid to stop and ask people during the class if this stuff is making sense. It is very hard to get someone to follow through on a change, particularly a longstanding, deeply rooted habit, if they don't think the change makes sense.

Emotional:

Another step in the process is to help the audience recognize what is in it for them. This is easier said than done. We would like to believe that the benefits of safety training are obvious to everyone but unfortunately this is not the case. When I am invited to come in and provide training I will often be asked by the company, what do you need for the training? One of the things I ask for is a table in the back with coffee, sodas or juice and some sort of snack. Why...because when the employees first walk into the room I want them instantly to know that there is something in this for them. I will work hard to inject humor and energy and make the class fun and interesting so that as it progresses they do see what is in it for them, but initially they may all be wondering why they have to come to this mandatory training.

Effective marketing is another way to increase the odds that people will perceive that there is something in it for them. Companies market their products all the time...why...to make people believe that this product is something that they can't live without. Look at car commercials. People driving the car are so happy and life is good...it makes people think that if they bought the same car that their life would look the same. In essence the commercial is created to say to the audience "this is what's in it for you" if you buy this vehicle. Look at how we sell safety training. "Be in the training room at 2 P.M. for mandatory safety training". It's not hard to see why with that kind of marketing it's hard to find an audience that wants to buy what we're selling.

Physical:

Finally, look at the physical aspect of the equation. Physical doesn't only mean physical job site, but also all the things that occur in the physical world outside the class that either promote, or inhibit the behavior the company is looking for. How many times does a company tell employees to ask for help when help is not readily available, or it is not socially acceptable to do this? How many times do we tell an employee to use a better lifting technique when the job won't allow it? How many times do we tell employees in a classroom that this information is really, really important, and then they go out into the workplace and never hear it mentioned again. These are the things in the physical workplace that will determine the success or failure of a training program. Ask yourself the following when a class is over; what will our employees see, hear, feel, touch, etc. that will promote the messages that we just delivered? Posters are fine, but they are not enough, particularly if what the poster says is not consistent with the reality of the workplace. Are there opportunities to repeat the messages in shift meetings or to remind people in passing? Has any equipment been purchased or modified to make the desired behavior easier to achieve? When a company asks, and then answers these questions and makes the effort to create a physical workplace that promotes safe behaviors, the return on investment for employee training will go up dramatically.

Pulling it all together

REP was developed to make it easier for companies to implement training in a way that will maximize its effectiveness. For most companies there is no formal way to determine the impact of their training, and while it is difficult to measure the outcomes, REP can help organizations put the training in place in a way that dramatically improves the odds for success. Over time, employees will recognize that training has been elevated to the level it should be, with productivity, quality, customer service and all the other aspects that are considered essential for a company's success. These other business functions all have a methodical way to insure that for

every dollar spent on production, quality, etc., there is a measurable return. It is these formal systems that make it abundantly clear to employees that the company places high value on these things. In the absence of a system or formal approach, as is often the case with employee training, it is easy to look as if what is being done has less value. Organizations are going to continue to spend a great deal of time, resources and energy to influence employee safety in the workplace; utilizing REP, the Rational, Emotional and Physical Approach to Training will go a long way towards getting the most out of the energy that has been invested.