KEYS TO GAINING EMPLOYEE AND EXECUTIVE BUY-IN

FOR ORGANIZATIONAL TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

Too often, those in charge of identifying, developing, and implementing corporate training programs are stuck between a rock and a hard place. Or more specifically, they're stuck between uninterested employees and unyielding organizational leadership.

Leadership often view training and development programs as professional development fluff; it may be positive for individuals, but they don't see how it's positive for the company's bottom line. Consequently, they're unwilling to invest in more complex (and possibly more costly) training that could bring about real results. The team members, meanwhile, view training as "busywork" that cuts into limited hours of the day, pulling them away from their desks where the real work is done. Employees may even resent training programs, seeing them as mandated by out-of-touch leaders who don't understand the nuts and bolts of the learning they've assigned.

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Even if the training is truly valuable, team members and leaders alike may still view it negatively. That's because their buy-in on the program either wasn't gained—or wasn't even sought in the first place. In other words, they don't understand the benefit and therefore remain unconvinced about the training initiative's worth. Getting buy-in for the importance and results of that training will not only increase the amount of investment you can make in training and development initiatives, but will dramatically increase the effectiveness of the training itself. In this guide, you'll learn why gaining buy-in for training programs from both employees and organizational leaders is vital for training success—and how to do it.

Winning Employee Buy-In

If you've ever led or invested in a training program, you know what a headache it can be to get attendees to pay attention and take the content seriously. During a training presentation, participants are more likely to be falling asleep—or playing on their phones—than jotting down diligent notes.

If you've ever observed a training scenario that played out like this, then your organization clearly didn't get your employees' buy-in before the training. Getting them to "buy-in" to your training program, where they exhibit excitement that's backed up by real effort about the program, will make all the difference. Here's how to get that buy-in:

Communicate the Training's Real Value

It's hard to care about something you don't understand. And yet, training participants are often ushered into a training session with little to no explanation of why the training is taking place. Employees want and need to know both the "how" and the "why" of the training. Set expectations in advance for what the training session will look like. Is it a one-day seminar? Will the day-long or week-long group training sessions be reinforced through coaching, progress check-ins, and supplemental training materials? (Hint: They should be! More on that later.) Share with them the roadmap for the training program and how it will be delivered to help build their excitement for what's to come and convince them that the training is a serious endeavor.

Next, communicate the "why" of the training. Yes, training is clearly taking place to teach participants a new skill—but dig deeper than that. Why should the participants care about learning something new? Demonstrate how the training relates to the things the team members care about most—like learning new leadership skills that will also aid them in their climb up the corporate ladder or working on teamwork skills that build camaraderie and foster innovation, making working together an enjoyable experience (no more stressing out when it's time to form new teams!). Show them how the training will be immediately applicable to their jobs, making their workplace reality easier and more engaging.

Furthermore, engaged employees want to feel that they're a part of something bigger than themselves. Capitalize on that by drawing the connection between how the training serves your company's overall mission, vision, and goals and how it serves the employees' individual goals.
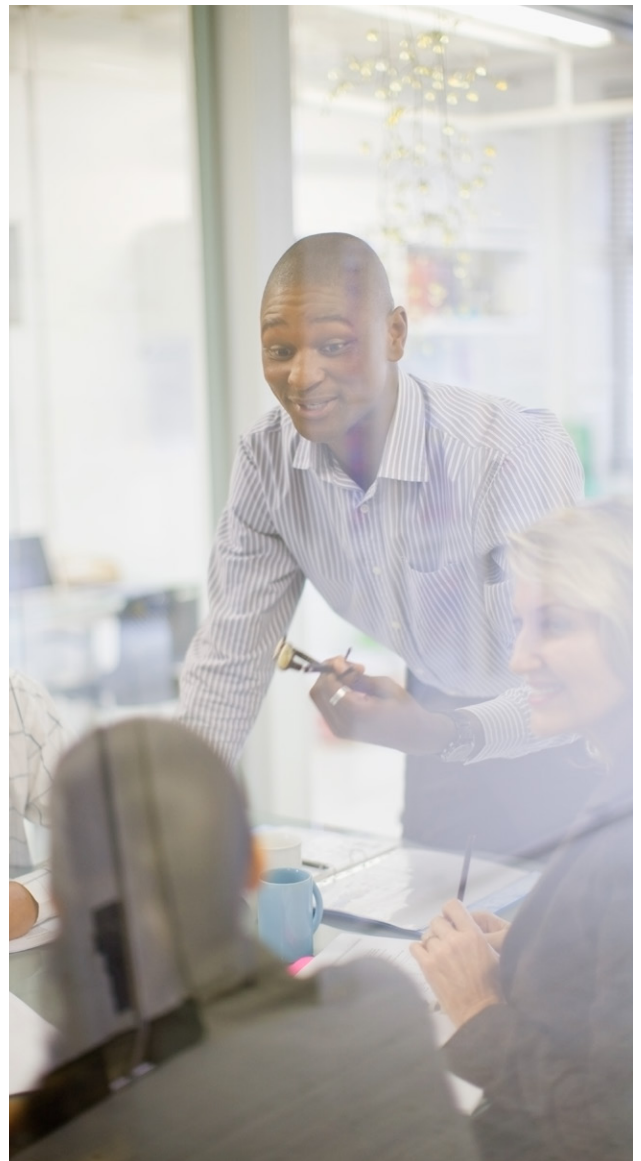
Involve Leadership

If leaders don't care about a new training initiative, then their teams won't care about the training. Period. That's why enthusiasm for training must come from the top down. When leaders become supportive of and involved in new training and development initiatives, that signals to employees that the new training is a top priority for the company. And they will then pay attention. Plus, leaders need to be keenly aware of what everyone is learning during training so that they can model the learned behaviors themselves. At work, we're expected to take cues from leaders—so if leaders aren't living the learning, the employees certainly won't either.

Make Training Exciting and Sustainable Through Experiential Learning

Most employees regard training like the plague, because it's just plain boring. That's because they're expecting passive training, like PowerPoint presentations, video-based lectures, or "interactive" training that's simply done at their desks—the kind of "learning" that goes in one ear and out the other.

Change the team's perception of training by investing in experiential learning activities. Experiential learning is learning by doing, where participants are immersed in an interactive, discovery-based learning scenario that mimics the real-world job realities they face on a day-to-day basis. Through experiential learning, participants are solving problems and gaining competencies in real time, immediately applying the skills and knowledge they're learning to the task at hand. Crucially, experiential learning activities are themed—for example, participants may be "transported" to an Amazonian jungle, tasked with discovering valuable treasure. Themed activities amp up the fun and help participants feel safe in taking risks during the activity, which allows for maximized learning. If the interactive training only mimicked actual workplace scenarios, then participants would be far more risk-averse, because nobody wants to fail at work!

Besides being fun and high-energy, the experiential learning approach to training is highly effective. Studies have shown that "learning by doing" results in greater reflective judgment, stronger reasoning skills, and a greater capacity to deal with complex situations.[1] The experiential approach also results in learning that sticks. Learning by doing results in learning retention rates as high as 75 percent, compared to the far lower retention rates (think five to 10 percent) that can be expected from passive learning, like reading or listening to a lecture.[2] When you share with employees that the training will be both highly effective *and* memorable, they'll be more convinced of the training's value.

LEARNING *BY DOING* = **75%** *RETENTION RATES*

Set Clear Expectations That This Isn't "One and Done" Training

Employees may think that training is a waste of time, because they don't feel supported during the training journey. It's impractical to believe one can master transformative skills in a day! That's why it's important to invest in training initiatives that provide ongoing support—and communicate what this support will look like at the outset of training.

Explore training programs that have ongoing coaching and periodic reviews built into the program. That's what garners top results. Case in point: A study conducted by Public Personnel Management found that managers who went through training coupled with eight weeks of coaching after the training session experienced a productivity increase of 88 percent. Compare that to managers who just went through the training alone: They experienced a much smaller productivity gain of 22.8 percent.[3]

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Other types of retention programs can also help sustain the training and make employees feel more supported. For example, gamification reinforcement—like weekly online games that award "prizes" (even if they're just digital) for moving up levels in the game—works as a reminder of the new knowledge they've acquired without taking a lot of time out of the workweek. Other retention strategies include reading programs, leader-led discussions, and monthly application and retention sessions that revisit the training, with the help of session facilitators.

Finally, make sure to transparently link the training to key performance indicators (KPIs) and that their gains in certain KPIs will be measured after the training. Knowing that their results along key metrics will be measured serves as a bit of a wake-up call to employees: This training isn't just "busywork"; participants are expected to deliver real, measurable results that incorporate what they've learned. Confirming that the training results will be tracked and measured will motivate employees to treat the training seriously and to give it their all.

Winning Executive Buy-In

Without employee buy-in, training initiatives are bound to fail. But without buy-in from executive leadership, training initiatives won't even start. Here's how to get buy-in from the decision-makers in your organization:

From "Cost Center" to "Revenue Producer"

When you bring up the need to invest in new training to leaders, the first thing they'll see is dollar signs—and not in a good way. New training initiatives mean an investment of company money, time, and resources—resources that could be spent on organizational initiatives that can produce revenue. Frame the training investment in a language that leadership can understand: potential profitability.

Share with executive leadership how training and development initiatives have been strongly linked to major profitability gains. In fact, according to a study by the American Training & Development,[4] companies that invested more in training saw significantly higher sales and a larger profit per employee. The exact numbers are impressive: Companies that invested the most resources in training saw a whopping 57 percent increase in sales, and companies with the best performance reported that they trained 86 percent of their employees. Not to mention, effective training results in productivity gains and higher engagement from employees—which increases profitability, because employees are now working harder, smarter, and faster.

Furthermore, show the leadership team how you plan to cut costs—without losing out on effectiveness—for your proposed training program. For example, if your organization is large, consider programs that incorporate digital retention strategies, which are easily scalable. Or explore options for training your own trainers. In other words, instead of bringing in outside trainers for every future training session, wisely invest your budget in training in-house facilitators who can then manage the training sessions themselves over and over again.

Tie Training to Leadership's Goals

You can also tie the benefits of training to more specific organizational goals, beyond simply increasing profitability. Consider these three possible scenarios and how training represents a strategic investment:

Organizational leaders are concerned about the future health of the company, and they don't see any employees who may be willing and able to "step up to the plate" when current leaders may be ready to step down in a few years. An investment in leadership training primes the leadership pipeline.

Management has just started to explore how the organization can expand in major ways, and a merger with another company may be in the future. Change management training for the leadership team will equip leaders with the skills and foresight they need to navigate the company through rocky times of change.

Company sales have been consistent for years—but leadership wants to rise above the sales plateau it has hit. Skills training for the company's sales professionals can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their sales strategies, and increase sales.

Organizational leaders have to weigh the costs, benefits, and expected outcomes of proposed strategic initiatives, which results in some tough decisions. Leadership will certainly appreciate it if your investment proposal for strategically targeted training helps make the case for certain decisions over others.

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Emphasize Results With a Three-Pronged Approach

Ultimately, gaining corporate buy-in for your chosen training program comes down to results. If you can illustrate exactly how a training program can garner lasting results, corporate buy-in becomes a distinct possibility. Try this three-pronged approach to implementing a program that's results-oriented:

1. Choose training that takes a holistic approach to learning outcomes.

Too often, training programs will focus on only teaching skills—overlooking the other factors that lead to true behavior change. The kind of programs that will bring about real results will involve more than just skills training. They should include helping participants develop conviction, encouraging them to take personal responsibility for learning outcomes and providing adequate opportunity for practice and feedback. A "results" vs. "information" orientation will also ensure that participants have the requisite skills to solve pressing work-place problems. In other words, including results-orientation provides participants with the tools to figure out exactly how the training is applicable on the job. When these priorities are linked to experiential learning the training then becomes optimally personally relevant, resulting in true behavior change.

2. Shift accountability from trainer to trainee.

Many training participants have a "teach me" attitude toward training. They expect to just sit back and absorb the knowledge being taught by trainers, and they assume it's the trainer's job to make that knowledge stick. But training that produces lasting results puts the learning onus on the participant. For example, before training begins, managers can meet with trainees to outline expected performance results and how the new training will help them achieve those results. Participants will go into the training with a specific, actionable learning goal in mind, one that's measureable based on the results they later achieve.

3. Know what impact you want your training to make.

Before you invest in training, figure out if it makes financial sense to do so by running a cost-benefit analysis. You can do this by determining the program's projected ROI. First, pinpoint the training program's desired outcome—for example, helping employees effectively manage their time so that they can increase their work-loads. Then estimate the quantitative result of the desired outcome—for example, allowing employees to increase their workloads (rather than hiring new employees) will save the company $150,000. Now determine the total program cost, which is simply the number of participants multiplied by the cost per participant.

Plug these numbers into the final equation to determine the net quantitative return: Just subtract the estimated quantitative return (in our example, $150,000) from the estimated program cost. If that final number is positive—and impressively so—it will be hard for organizational leaders to say no to your training request. The potential gain in profit is right there in front of them.

ESTIMATED QUANTITATIVE RETURN
– **PROGRAM COST**

NET QUANTITATIVE RETURN

Next Steps: Find the Right Training and Development Program to Meet Your Needs

Choosing and implementing the right training program is easiest when you involve those affected most—the executive team that makes the final strategic and financial decisions (including training investments) and the employees who carry those decisions out—in the process. Buy-in from both employees and the leadership team increases the chances that training will be effective, sustainable, and transformative for your company.

So, what kind of training and development program will help you reach your organizational goals? The Eagle's Flight team has been offering corporate training that delivers results for nearly three decades, and in that time, we have worked with a wide variety of organizations, including more than 50 percent of the Fortune 500. Our clients span industries from automotive, agriculture, food and beverage, and hospitality to finance, pharmaceuticals, mining, and energy. That experience, married to our extensive in-house design and customization capabilities, allows us to deliver to your organization's unique and specific needs.

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