

■ MID-IOWA BUSINESS

Employee training done right, part 1

Unless it's somehow associated with the production of biofuels, chances are your business has seen better days. Last month, we discussed that the silver lining in a market downturn is the opportunity to take a (hopefully short) breather and ready your organization for the next uptick. By focusing on improving the capacity and flexibility of people and machines now, the next rise in demand can be handled with less incremental hiring, overtime and stress.

Improving the effectiveness and productivity of employees almost always requires training of some sort. Unfortunately, company training programs are often poorly designed and implemented, resulting in minimal impact to business results, frustrated managers and bewildered employees. I'd like to introduce some guidelines to increase the odds that your company sees a positive return on its future training investments.

The first, and perhaps most important, step is to determine where training should be applied. This is a key strategic decision that should be based on the identified area(s) of greatest potential improvement. Some questions to ask include:

- What do the majority of our customers' complaints concern?

- What were the sources of greatest stress during the latest period of peak demand?

- Where is the largest gap between our current performance and our desired performance?

Training is best used for addressing deficiencies in skills rather than shortcomings in motivation. That's not to say training to increase employees' awareness of the realities of today's competitive markets and ensure they clearly understand their role in satisfying customers is a waste of time. It does mean that you likely can't take someone with a lousy general attitude towards life and train them to have a healthy attitude about their job. Rather, motivation issues are best handled via employee selection, rewards and discipline processes. Those sound like management activities, don't they? Thus, training for general motivation or morale issues should be targeted at developing leaders' skills, which are likely at the root of the poor morale issue.

Once the need for specific training has been determined, a list of desired outcomes should be established. What exactly do we want the training to accomplish? Do you want employees to simply be aware of or conversant on a topic, or do you want them to immediately begin



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applying a new skill or technique as part of their daily work? How that question is answered greatly impacts how training should be delivered.

Too often businesses expect employees' behaviors to change immediately after blanketing the organization with training that provides little more than definitions of new skills and why they are important. This seems akin to a hospital addressing an onslaught of victims from an earthquake by giving everyone an aspirin and expecting them all to get better.

An across-the-board approach makes sense if the desired outcome is simply to create a common awareness and vocabu-

lary among employees. Leaders should not expect any behavioral changes resulting in tangible results. The universal approach may be necessary, however, in laying the groundwork for future specific training that requires some common understanding.

On the other hand, if the intent is for employees to actually apply what they learn resulting in changed behaviors and results, focusing on a small segment of the business is typically preferred. Realizing actual changed behaviors and improved performance almost always requires holding people accountable. This is more easily accomplished by focusing on a targeted fraction of the organization, one in which the area's leaders clearly understand their role in ensuring the new skills are properly used. I recommend starting with the part of the organization with the most opportunity for improvement. This inch-wide, mile-deep approach also allows results to be monitored closely and lessons learned to be applied to subsequent efforts in other parts of the organization.

Next month, we'll discuss designing and delivering effecting training modules for adults.

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■ LOCAL BUSINESS

Wheatsfield grows larger, stays local

By LAURA MILLSAPS
Staff Writer

In Wheatsfield Cooperative, manager Linda Johnson's crowded office has plans for the future hanging right on the wall, floor plans for the new location under construction at 413 Northwestern Ave., slated for a late January opening.

Building permits were obtained in mid-October and demolition is done. Johnson said they are now down to details, a lot of them. It's been her full-time job for almost a year while the rest of the management team handles daily operations.

"My main job is to get the new store open," Johnson said.

"We want to take this little store and put it in this bigger space and still have our members feel at home."

Everything from water and sewer to conforming to the city's façade grant program were on Johnson's checklist

when The Tribune asked for a progress update of the store's expansion, which will take it from 2,000 square feet of retail space in its current location on Douglas Avenue to 6,000 square feet in the new one.

Equipment is ordered for the new store, including walk-in refrigeration units that will need to be framed into the construction.

"We were concerned about that because the manufacturer shuts down from Thanksgiving through the holidays, but we've got the order in," she said.

Plans for service at the new store are under way as well. The management staff at the store recently attended a retreat to look at labor scheduling

and hiring for the expanded store, as well as stocking a larger inventory.

"We'll have new people we are bringing into the family of Wheatsfield, and we have to deal with the culture shock of being in a different, bigger location," Johnson said.

Johnson said with the expansion comes the need to work with local producers to make sure supplies for the new store are adequate, particularly fresh meat, a new department for Wheatsfield.

"There's a real lack of organic meat processing facilities in our area and in Iowa in general," she said. "We can't have meat one week and then not have

WHEATSFIELD *please see page 4*