

## Making Training Matter: Closing the Talent Management Cycle

By Scott J. Cameron, IPMA-CP

All levels of government, particularly in this period of fiscal austerity, need to ensure that their employees are as productive as possible and equipped to achieve mission priorities. One important tool for accomplishing these goals is to optimize use of the agency's training budget.



Training in government takes a variety of forms and serves multiple purposes. I would argue that it is too often not pursued strategically, merely focusing on policy compliance or allowing the employee to pursue whatever training strikes their fancy at the time.

### Compliance Training – Necessary But No Panacea

Compliance-oriented training typically responds to a policy mandate that all employees be trained on a particular topic. Topics often include subjects such as IT security, sexual harassment and agency ethics regulations. This training is necessary to assure legislatures and appointed officials that government employees are doing their jobs in a way that comports with norms of behavior and appropriately safeguards the public assets provided for the use of government employees; it is good to do. However, it does little to advance the mission of the agency, other than perhaps to help protect the agency's credibility.

Compliance training may reduce the odds of employee behavior becoming a public embarrassment. In that way it may somewhat protect an agency from having its mission threatened by scandal. For instance, at least one federal lawmaker, in the wake of the General Services Administration's now-notorious Las Vegas "conference

scandal, is calling for the agency to be abolished. In this case, personal behavior is clearly threatening the agency mission.

Of course, compliance training is no guarantee of good behavior. I suspect that more than one decision maker involved in the GSA imbroglio had satisfactorily completed training on federal travel regulations, just as I would assume that the Secret Service agents who were recently found to have inappropriate female companions while on overseas duty had training but simply chose to ignore it.

### Training as a Tool for Talent Management

Creative employees and well-meaning managers can identify non-compliance training that either personally interests the employee or may plausibly provide value for the agency. However, optimizing the training budget requires placing training in its appropriate place in a broader context. That context may be thought of as a talent management cycle. The components of the cycle include strategic planning, workforce planning, individual performance management and training.

Strategic planning establishes the mission, goals, strategies, and performance metrics for an agency or subcomponent. It specifies what the people who work in the organization are expected to collectively accomplish.

Workforce planning lays out an approach for the organization to secure the right people in the right place at the right time with the right knowledge, skills, abilities and competencies to facilitate mission accomplishment.

In individual performance management, the performance plan specifies what a particular individual is to accomplish during the course of the performance period, which is typically a year. The performance appraisal process, both formal, and better yet informal, provides

feedback to the employee on how well they have done. This includes information on how the employee contributed to the organization's mission objectives. It also should document how well the employee has developed himself or herself as a professional during the year.

The agency training program can be most effectively leveraged, by being closely integrated with the individual performance management system. This can be done through several alternative mechanisms. The key characteristic is a thoughtful and adequately documented approach that reflects the future needs of the agency, as well as those of the individual.

### Training and Performance – a Tight Integration

Ideally, the agency workforce plan should be stepped down, in a simplified fashion, to each subcomponent in the agency. For instance, an agency workforce plan may call for having a cadre of employees skilled in delivering agency services through social media by 2014. An individual program manager at that agency should then have a short workforce plan that identifies which programs might be facilitated by social media. That plan would specify how many people with those skills would be needed in each of those programs. The program manager can then have conversations about whether they should hire for these skills or train existing employees on them with those employees who report directly to him or her.

The outcome of such discussions may well be inclusion of a performance standard in a particular employee's performance plan that they take training that year on blogging or SharePoint. Such training may not otherwise have occurred to the employee or to the supervisor in the absence of the broader discussions of the organization's future skill needs.

On a parallel track, training needs should flow from the performance appraisal itself. If an employee needs to improve in an area of his responsibilities to be fully successful, then training can help close that gap. Better yet, if an employee has the potential to be truly outstanding in an aspect of his job, then relevant training can be specified in the employee's performance plan to encourage the employee's potential to become manifest. Training should therefore not only be scheduled for remedial purposes, but it should also be used as a tool to help promising employees expand their horizons and become super-achievers.

## Individual Development Plan

The best practice in identifying training needs is arguably an individual development plan (IDP). The IDP can be embedded in a technology-enabled learning management system (LMS). However, almost as satisfactory is a simple paper-based IDP developed by an employee and her supervisor, and periodically updated after the annual performance appraisal is completed. Instead of putting training requirements in the employee's performance plan, they can go into the IDP. The point is that the employee and the supervisor invest time and effort in determining how the agency will invest training funds in the employee's development so that the employee will over time be better able to improve his contribution to achieving the agency mission.

It is worth noting that training should not be limited to instructor-led training or Web-based training. On-the-job training, including rotational assignments or details outside of the employee's regular organization, can be equally or even more effective learning strategies.

In any case, the thought process and the commitment is what is essential—not the document that memorializes them.

With that being said, the advantage of using the IDP is that it naturally takes a multi-year view of the employee's development. In contrast, the annual performance plan necessarily focuses on just a 12-month period. Both employees and supervisors need the longer perspective



on the employee's development that the IDP can afford.

An LMS may enable senior managers to see whether, across the organization, there is a pattern of training opportunities being scheduled in IDPs that collectively will achieve the goals of the workforce plan. For instance, using our previous example, is it clear that across the agency we really are developing a cadre of people getting trained on social media tools? The LMS can indicate whether we are getting too few or too many people put into this training relative to our workforce plan's projected needs. It can also tell managers how many current employees already have the desired skills so that a skills gap can be closed, or the agency can avoid spending money to create a skills surplus.

## Beyond Compliance

In summary, here are some principles to optimize the value received from your organization's training budget:

- Compliance-oriented training is necessary but not sufficient.
- Training for individual employees should be informed by the specified future strategic needs of the organization, not based on individual whim.
- Training should be the product of a

thoughtful discussion between the employee and the supervisor.

- Training should be closely tied to the outcome of the annual employee performance appraisal.
- Training should reflect a long-term view of the employee's developmental needs.

Training is best viewed as part of an integrated agency talent management system, also including strategic planning, workforce planning, and performance management. By applying these principles, agencies will optimize the value received from their available training funds.

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