

Establishing a Learning Culture and Ongoing Training

As we learn more about how humans acquire skills and knowledge, and as those skills and the knowledge base evolves, we need to re-think how we go about training staff and volunteers. The one-shot basic training with occasional refreshers may work for simple tasks in a static environment. But it's more likely that we're dealing with complex needs in dynamic settings. This scenario requires an organization that's committed to ongoing training, constantly evaluating effectiveness and feeding the results of evaluation back into the training process. Learning is ongoing and our skills/knowledge evolve through the evaluation and feedback process. We develop a learning culture.

Features of a learning culture

- Knowledge and skills reside in many members of the culture and all members have easy access to knowledge and skill development. Everyone is committed to being both a learner and a trainer. The development of mentors, teaching assistants, coaches is ongoing to maintain a large and diverse pool of training resources.
- Time is set dedicated to training on a frequent and regular basis. People aren't pulled out of their duties for training—it's part of their ongoing responsibilities. There is some training component each day/week. Training is broken down into small/frequent modules rather than delivered in large blocks infrequently.
- Feedback is valued and shared freely. All members of the organization (even instructors, trainers, managers) seek out feedback about their performance and act on it. Observing, feedback and coaching skills are taught to each individual, and peers share feedback regularly.
- Systematic evaluation measures the success of our efforts on a large scale. Evaluating our success in relation to organization needs and objectives helps inform improvements to the training process.
- Our audience drives the training process. Observations and feedback from our target audiences is a significant measure of success. Sensitivity to evolving audience needs is part of training, and addressing changing audience needs informs training strategies.
- Training is directly tied to the mission of the organization, supports organizational goals, and supported at all levels of the organization.

Your organization may score at higher or lower levels on these criteria, and that's not important. Our goal is not only to be more effective trainers, but to work toward building that learning culture in our organization.

- Look for opportunities to model these traits for others in your organization.
- As you train new staff and volunteers, work toward instilling in them the values of a learning organization.
- Reinforce these values when you see them in existing staff/volunteers.
- Start building your talent pool of mentors and assistant trainers.

- Look for opportunities to model the effective use of feedback and encourage peer feedback.
- Start building agreed-upon definitions of success criteria and give these to your trainees as a tool to develop/improve their own skills (and to feel good about their own success).
- Collaborate with like organizations. Share training resources and information. Cross-pollinate by exchanging new ideas and fresh perspectives.
- Bring learning opportunities to your staff/volunteers frequently, and take advantage of them yourself.
- Look for opportunities to observe and learn more about your audience. Look for ways to measure your effectiveness with your audience.
- Develop a peer group to motivate each other and hold each other accountable for taking these steps.