



Talking heads

Employers want staff to relate better both to customers and to each other. To help improve communication skills, some are replacing trainers with psychologists. Barrie Charles reports

Once considered an optional extra, soft skills are now seen to translate into hard cash, with communication and interpersonal skills top of any organisation's wish list. But while everybody agrees they want their staff to become more competent in areas such as influencing people, customer service, negotiating, presentation and team working, how are they going about delivering these skills?

One school of thought says that a better understanding of how human beings operate is improving the effectiveness of training solutions. Robert Myatt is a director of supplier Kaisen Consulting, which only uses chartered psychologists. 'The solution is more likely to work and bring the bene-

fits you anticipate if it complies with psychological principles,' he claims.

Myatt draws a distinction between passing across know-how and developing skills. 'Know-how is a function of memory, which is quite easy to develop, whereas the skills part involves deeper areas of the brain, such as the emotional centres, which are much harder to influence,' he argues. Experiential learning, where we try out the same new things over and over again, is essential to progress (see case study).

Helena Clayton, principal consultant in personal effectiveness at Roffey Park, agrees: 'It's very hard to learn a technique or skill unless you spend quite a bit of time practising it, experimenting with different ways of doing

things, and getting feedback on what worked and what didn't.'

Psychological concepts underpin popular current approaches such as neuro-linguistic programming and emotional intelligence, but Chris Horseman, managing director of Balance Learning, sounds a note of caution: 'We don't do one-minute managing anymore really, do we? These things come and go.' Employers need to look beyond the latest buzz words and check that the course content is sound.

There has also been a shift in how training is delivered, with an increasing focus on individual needs. 'One of the big trends is developing learning that is directly linked to an individual's

MARKET TRENDS INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

particular situation,' says Clayton. 'We invite people to bring their own issues into the training room—it makes it much more real and meaningful for them.'

Skills development and practice using workplace problems is far more likely to bring about behaviour change than a few days away from the office working on case studies.

'The days of the sheep dip, where HR said we need to complete this programme, get everybody through and tick the box, have virtually gone,' agrees Stuart Allen, a consultant at Hemsley Fraser. The focus now is on learning outcomes rather than on the amount of training delivered.

Clayton also believes that there is a difference between learning a technique and growing as an individual: 'If you do a great job of developing yourself as a person, then that will lead to better communication skills.'

These trends have led to a shift away from standard courses towards in-house programmes that can be customised to the needs of the organisation and individuals. A typical in-house programme might consist of a series of group sessions, with one or two weeks between each event to allow individuals to practise new skills.

Short, sharp sessions lasting a couple of hours are increasingly popular. While trainers typically prefer longer to tackle skills development in-depth, such an approach is attractive to the business and might be the only way to allow a whole team to train together.

Hands-on approach

The bonding that develops between learners within such training programmes is often an important added benefit. English Heritage has used the concept of 'action learning sets' to develop the interpersonal skills of managers in a programme managed by Roffey Park. Following two residential courses designed to develop a range of skills, delegates split up into groups of five or six to practise the new behaviours, meeting regularly for one-day sessions to tackle individual issues.

'The main benefit of this sort of approach is that people are learning

CASE STUDY ANGLIAN WATER

Anglian Water is using Kaisen's Personal Impact & Influence module to develop communications and interpersonal skills among a group of mainly middle managers. Following an assessment of individual skills needs, the module was made a key part of a 12-month development programme.

'We chose that particular module because we felt that communications and the ability to argue one's case are so important,' explains Phil Brown, people performance manager at Anglian Water.

The core of the training is a two-day course that covers cognitive skills to better manage your inner thought processes; behavioural skills to ensure you make the impact you want; and observational skills so that you can read how others are responding.

Brown thinks that the personal assessment delegates undertake before the course and the cognitive skills development are highly important elements of the programme. 'The key thing is



Brown: follow-up key

understanding yourself, understanding where you're coming from, and the issues you have in communication,' he insists.

Following the role-playing practice on the course, Brown organises individual follow-up sessions with the person's line manager or with himself. 'You do need the follow-up so you can remind people to practise,' he says.

Brown believes that practical training is needed whatever the level of the individual. 'When you get to senior management level, everybody assumes that you know how to do these things, and often courses are based on intellectual discussion rather than on practicing techniques,' he complains.

'However senior you are, changed behaviour will only occur if you constantly repeat new approaches.'

Meanwhile, Brown is ensuring that the current development cohort has top-level support. 'We make sure the chief executive is involved, meets the delegates and gets to know them, because they are potentially our senior managers of the future.'

through the very real issues they come across every day,' says Helen Rushby, learning and development manager, at English Heritage. 'They're learning how to apply the theory within their jobs and bring the whole thing to life.'

'When the group comes together, each person has a bit of allotted time, so you don't end up with one person dominating the whole day. It's very much individual actions they come away with, although they learn from each other as well.'

Another major trend is the increasing use of delivery methods other than face-to-face group sessions. Using e-learning for some of the theory element can reduce the length of the classroom component and the total cost. 'You can really save a lot of time and money by using online learning or other media such as DVDs or books,' says Horseman from Balance Learning. 'Of course, people have to be interested enough to go through books and one of the advantages of online learning is that it can be tracked.'

At the other end of the scale, one-to-one personal coaching is growing in importance, even though it is expen-

sive. 'It costs an awful lot of money when people move on,' says Allen. 'More and more organisations are now taking the view: "Let's spend a bit more money to hang onto what we've got"' The aim is to reduce staff turnover, improve succession planning and fill more vacancies internally.

But you do need coaching experts to make sure that this kind of development is pitched at the appropriate level. 'You need the right balance of support and challenge,' says Clayton. 'Coaching that's too supportive can end up giving people a warm feeling, but doesn't sufficiently stretch them. Coaching that's too challenging can leave people feeling vulnerable.'

So courses, group sessions, e-learning and coaching, plus other tools such as books, online forums and mentoring, are all available to include in your modern-day communication skills development programme. However, as with any training, the key is to match the blend to the needs of the learners. Only then will communication and interpersonal skills grow to meet the psychological requirements of doing business. ■



We invite people to bring their own issues into the training room

Helena Clayton, principal personal effectiveness consultant, Roffey Park