Examples of Training Overpromotion

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Corporate trainers often have to design and then promote their training program proposals to top management. Sometimes the effort can deceive managers who approve these programs. Trainers might claim their programs increase productivity when the programs do not do so. They might claim that their programs meet the company’s needs when the only needs satisfied are the training department’s.

Overpromotion of training programs can occur for several reasons. A trainer might mistakenly infer cause and effect when there is only a correlation between the training program ratings and corporate performance measures. A training department’s budget (and salaries) can become larger with an expanded curriculum. A trainer’s specialty can become the emphasis for the company, therefore heightening the prestige and money coming to the trainer. A program can be developed to justify job existence for the trainer in the face of severe budget cuts. One trainer can "steal" a training program from another trainer within a large company by getting it accepted first. A trainer can help or hurt an employee because of friendship, competition, discrimination, etc. Being inexperienced or out of time, a trainer can hide poor training preparedness. A trainer also might fear rejection of other trainers, management, or trainees. Accordingly, the trainer might embellish the training program ratings to show he or she isn’t rejected.

Purpose

Many forms of overpromotion described in this paper are documented in statistical textbooks and training articles. This paper is unique in that it reviews these sources and applies them to training program promotion.

There is no intention to assume trainers frequently deceive management. With statistics,
there is always a potential for deception whether it is intended or not.

Examples of Overpromotion

According to Harris and DeSimone (88-89), the following activities can help develop and promote training programs in companies. Trainers assess instructional needs, develop training objectives, select training methods, propose program costs, and research and present their past "successes". Each activity contains potential overpromotion.

Assessing Instructional Needs

"Productivity is down only because company managers do not have sufficient people skills. My training program can improve the people skills of the managers."

Productivity problems could be couched in terms of what the trainer can supposedly fix. Training is advertised as a cure-all for all organizational problems. Trainers might ignore "nontraining" reasons for low productivity, such as faulty equipment, insufficient supplies, poor harvest, and bad weather (Harris and DeSimone 182).

"Everyone in this organization needs to take this inventory control course. Though specific features of this course might not directly apply to some jobs here, the principles of the course might generalize to all jobs."

Trainers can propose classes that are "good for everybody" when the classes are really meant for a few in the company (Boss 216-218). A trainer can deceive management by getting management focused on the questionable general benefits of the program to all. As a result, only a few people might significantly benefit from the program.

Developing Training Objectives

"My training program should be used in this company because it has had rave reviews in other companies. Participants gave every aspect of this program outstanding marks."
Trainees might rate how they liked a training program and how much they learned from it. However, as Kirkpatrick (19-24) points out, favorable reactions toward training programs do not insure that learning has taken place, the behavior of the trainees has changed, or the company performance has improved because of the training program. Favorable trainee reactions can be important but might not be the main objective of the training program. A trainer might fool management by focusing solely on outstanding program reactions and avoiding discussions of company objectives.

Selecting Training Media and Methods

"The ski resort 400 miles from here is clearly the best place to do the program based on experience and the restfulness the location provides."

To secure a larger budget, trainers might resort to their favorite expensive training media and methods. The medium might be a video or teleconferencing system. The methods might involve a retreat at an expensive resort. If the training problem is couched in terms of what the "favorite expensive" medium can do best, that medium might be endorsed and used (Laird 75-77).

Costing the Program

"I got this $4999 training package for 30% off."

The training package could be 30% off retail price, wholesale price, exaggerated price, market price, or price that was marked two years ago. Psychologically, there might a $1000 difference (not $1) between $4999 and $5000. What does the company get for that price? How do the price and quality compare with similar packages? How much time does the training package take?

Researching Past Successes
“This weekend training program has shown outstanding results. Productivity has clearly increased and continues to increase as the result of this program.”

Trainers might state cause and effect when really there is only a spurious correlation between the training program ratings and improvements in trainee performance after the training program. A high correlation between training program ratings and corporate performance measures could be the result of the following moderating effects.

According to Cascio (395), the company could have changed its productivity for the better (or worse) because changes in the methods and means of production. Some of these include changes of equipment, computers, and methods of production, deadlines that make employees work harder, changes in compensation (motivation) programs, performance appraisals that are coming up shortly, changes of managers, changes of office arrangements (furniture, rooms, etc.). Experience on the job during training can improve productivity. This is especially true if the training program lasts a long time.

Often the nature of the training itself might not affect outcomes. It is simply the attention that the trainees receive that improves productivity. The company simply shows its concern with the trainee and therefore the trainee improves the productivity. Furthermore, the training program could have the same effect as a short vacation. The trainees could come back to their jobs refreshed, and temporarily increase production.

Trainers could simply lie about their program successes from the past by making up data. Typographical errors also could occur (Hunter and Schmidt 45).

Without pretesting, a trainer might incorrectly "prove" that a training program generated outstanding results. It is possible that the outstanding results did not come as the result of the training program but that the trainees were outstanding from the beginning of the program.
"This training program received a "4" rating (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). You see that this program is outstanding."

Graphic rating scales are known to have many problems. For example, trainers might develop rating scales that have little to do with the training objectives. A trainer could claim a "4" average was outstanding (Clement, Pinto, and Walker 11). However, trainers who had similar programs might average 4.5 or 4.9. The "4" rating is questionable because graphic rating scales are subject to various rating errors such as leniency, severity, central tendency, and halo errors (Cascio, 88-90).

"Based on a comparison of the pretest and posttest, students showed a large increase in their test scores. This shows the program was successful."

The use of pretesting could lead to many problems. If a pretest is taken, students can learn from the pretest. Test score improvement could be the result of testing rather than training. The pretest could have the hard questions while the posttest could have the easy questions. Higher scores could be the result of different questions. Test questions might not be valid. A word scramble test, for example, might be used to determine if a training program has improved typing skills. Loss of trainees during the training could be especially effective in increasing test scores between pretest and posttest. If everyone took a pretest and only the top candidates took the post test, then the post test score would likely be higher controlling for all other factors (Campbell and Stanley 211-215). A very small sample size (in terms of trainees) could lead to major problems. Greater sampling error could result if the sample size is small. (Hunter and Schmidt 45).

How Overpromotion Might Be Reduced
Establishing clear training objectives helps management focus on the organizational goals rather than the goals of the trainer (Cohen 49-50; Goldstein 3-6). Saari, Johnson, McLaughlin, and Zimmerlie (736-739), based on a survey of managers, found that effective training occurs when training is tied to business strategy and training objectives are connected to the bottom line, there is a commitment to invest time and money into the training, and trainers and managers develop goals together. Development and promotion of training programs need not be adversarial. Training managers, top managers, trainers, and others in companies should get together to develop a program that will suit the interests of all parties.

Evidence shows that few companies use more than trainee reactions to analyze the effectiveness of training programs (Saari, Johnson, McLaughlin, and Zimmerlie 739). Within an organization, a trainer's overpromotion of previous programs in the company can be reduced if there is more than one rating technique used (Wexley and Latham 78). As Kirkpatrick (19-25) states, trainee reactions, trainee scores on tests, changes in trainee behavior, and effects of the training on company performance can be used to analyze training programs. Dependence on multiple rating techniques provide a multidimensional view of previous successes.

Documentation should be carefully maintained once the approved training program starts so truthful evidence can be gathered for the justification of future proposals (Goldstein, 1984). Selected records include the dates of training, length of training, types of training activities, lists of trainees, trainee reactions, pretest/posttest scores, and investigations of training results to the company and trainees.

Research indicates that management can encourage more ethical behavior by clearly communicating organizational policies on ethics and following them (Karp and Abramms 37-39; Hegarty and Sims 455-456; Miceli and Near 277-280). A code of ethics applying to trainers
and all others in the company can be inserted in an employee handbook, posted on bulletin boards, and discussed in employee meetings. Codes of ethics could include standards for collecting and manipulating data such as the codes for the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance, and Instruction and the American Society for Training and Development (McLagan 1-3). The threat of punishment for unethical behavior can also increase ethical behavior (Hegarty and Sims 455-456).

Managers should request and be able to understand a sound analysis by trainers of their previous successes or failures in training. Many experimental designs can help companies evaluate training programs. Some designs involve pretesting, control groups, placebo groups, time-series analysis, and multiple comparison groups (Wexley and Latham 93-98).
Works Cited


Wexley, Kenneth and Latham, Gary P. *Developing and Training Human Resources in Organizations* Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1981.