

# Action Planning to Enhance Training Program Results

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Training programs have a purpose. The clearer and more specific the purpose, the greater the probability that tangible results will occur. Too often training programs do not produce demonstrable results, thereby raising serious questions about the value of the training and even more serious questions about its continuation.

Most training programs are adequately planned and presented. Typically trainers have a fairly clear notion of what knowledge and skills will be acquired by trainees. The problem generally results from a lack of action planning on the part of trainees. Unless action planning and concomitant self-assessment are integrated into training programs the likelihood of significant applications being made is reduced appreciably.

A broad array of training programs is currently available. Participation in a particular program presumes that some form of formal or informal needs assessment has been conducted by the potential trainee and the agency which the person represents. The needs assessments should yield specific responses to questions about organizational goals and the people helping to achieve them. For example:

We need to know more about \_\_\_\_\_ in order to do \_\_\_\_\_. Since Ms. Jones has assumed responsibility for those matters (goals and objectives) she will participate in

Training Program X in order to develop and/or improve her knowledge of \_\_\_\_\_ and her skills in \_\_\_\_\_.

If Ms. Jones is successful in the training program two immediate results will have occurred. First, she will have improved her own abilities and, secondly, she will be able to apply these abilities to the accomplishment of agency goals and objectives. The critical factor becomes the use and application of these abilities within the agency goal structure. Unless a plan is developed, optimum utilization of these skills and knowledge cannot result.

While an action plan can be developed in a variety of ways, the basic components tend to be quite similar from plan to plan. Any plan should be perceived as a tool, subject to modification as needs arise and circumstances change. However, the plan should be used as the prime vehicle for the specific purpose intended, and should not be put aside after development.

## COMPONENTS

An action plan can be subdivided and labeled in a variety of ways. The format is not critical but the essential elements are. Typically, an action plan will consist of five major elements: 1) Goals; 2) Objectives; 3) Activities; 4) Timeline; and 5) Evaluation.

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## Goals

Goals are broad, general statements of intended outcome which relate to the agency or organization. They usually reflect some unfulfilled need which the agency wishes to address and which, if accomplished in some degree, will make the organization move closer to reaching its purpose for being. It is not always possible to measure or demonstrate unequivocally that a goal has been accomplished. Evaluation decisions are usually made on the basis of objectives, not goals.

Some examples of agency goals are:

- 1.1 To improve our working relationship with other volunteer programs in our community.
- 1.2 To develop a marketing plan for the services or products of our agency.
- 1.3 To improve the solicitation skills of our agency volunteers.
- 1.4 To increase the amount of contributions to our agency.
- 1.5 To increase the involvement of our board in the affairs of our agency.
- 1.6 To improve financial planning within our agency.

Most agencies are familiar with organizational planning and periodically develop and update their goals. When progress toward reaching goals has not been made after a period of time, or when goals are highly challenging and internal expertise is not available, the prospect of "training someone" frequently arises. If the appropriate kind of training is readily available, the agency person can commence his or her training program.

However, often times goal setting and training do not occur in this logical manner. Frequently, the agency is apprised of the availability of publicly-offered training in certain areas and has the opportunity to select or participate in one or more segments of the total program. In this instance, goals are formulated to accommodate the training available.

It should be noted that there is absolutely nothing wrong with this process. Usually, these types of training programs are developed after extensive investigation of the needs of a diversity of similar agencies.

The key to getting started successfully and setting the stage for optimum results is to formulate one or more goals in writing prior to or at the outset of the training program. The goals should reflect the needs of the agency and not those of the individual trainee. The goals should be developed (or certainly approved) by the agency board and leadership. The relationship between the goals and the nature of the training program should be clear. While the agency may have other goals, these goals are directly related to the planned training and the action plan to be developed. Each trainee should present the goals in writing to the trainer. This will help the trainer, from the beginning of the program, understand better what participants are striving toward and help the trainer make adjustments to the training program if warranted.

## Objectives

Similarities exist between goals and objectives, although they are not the same. As was stated earlier, goals are broad, general statements of intended outcome. Objectives, on the other hand, are highly specific performance statements which enable decisions to be made on whether they have been achieved. Objectives indicate behavior or actions which are demonstrable, observable, or measurable. If an objective is well written, there is generally little difficulty in making an accurate appraisal of its achievement. The achievement of an objective or set of objectives contributes to the accomplishment of a goal.

Well-written objectives should contain definite elements:

1. Timeframe: "By when" will a decision be made concerning the objective's achievement?

2. Responsibility fixing: "Who" will do or accomplish something? Depending upon the nature of the objective, the "Who" can either be an individual or, in some cases, an organization. However, if it is an organization, somewhere in writing, it should be stated "Who" is primarily responsible.

3. Behavior: "What" will be done or accomplished? This refers to performance and describes what the "Who" will have done when demonstrating the achievement of the objective. Action verbs like "increase" are strong words for inclusion in objectives. The behavior must be observable or demonstrable. The behavior is also terminal and relates to behavior having occurred by the end of the specified time.

4. Criterion: The criterion refers to "how well" or "how much" the responsible person will have done when demonstrating accomplishment of the objective. It represents the performance standard which describes a minimum or an acceptable level of accomplishment and provides the means for ascertaining success.

Writing good objectives can be difficult at times, but the benefits are significant. If one begins with a good idea of what is to be accomplished, and relates this to the elements of an objective--one element at a time--the procedure becomes much more manageable.

Two sample objectives are provided. Attention should be directed to the elements and not the substance of the objectives since each agency will have its own needs reflected in the substance of its objectives.

#### Example 1:

By June 30, 1985 (*When-Timeframe*), Hometown Agency (*Who-- Responsible Person or Agent*) will have increased (*What-Behavior*) its annual contributions

by a minimum of 5% over the preceding fiscal year (*Criterion*).

#### Example 2:

By June 30, 1985, 80% of Hometown Agency Board Members will have increased their attendance at regular board meetings by a minimum of 10% over the preceding year.

Objectives should be realistic. That is, they should be attainable with significant effort given the available resources and timeframe. They should be challenging but not so difficult that there is little likelihood of their being achieved.

#### Activities

Activities consist of those things a person will do or have others do in order to move toward the achievement of an objective. An activity is a highly specific behavior or action. It is doing something. Activities range from very simple and routine to the highly complex and creative. They should be developed after the objective has been specified. It should be clear that the activity is directly related to the achievement of the objective. Typically, each objective will have several activities associated with it. A sufficient number and diversity of activities should be planned to ensure maximum opportunity for the objective to be achieved. It should be stated "who" is responsible for performing the activity.

#### Timeline

Each activity should be planned within a timeframe. It should be clear when the activity begins and when it ends or, if repeated, how often and when. Each activity should have its own timeframe.

#### Evaluation

Two basic types of evaluation exist which relate to action planning: formative and summative. Formative evaluation answers the question: "How am I (or we) doing on a day-to-

day basis as we move through a period of time toward achieving the stated objectives?" The reference points are not only the objectives but include the activities and associated timelines. Answers to this question let us make adjustments in our plan while the plan is in progress. Formative evaluation provides feedback in an ongoing way and avoids the problems associated with waiting until a project is over or a major time period elapsed, e.g., one year, before asking critical questions about the objectives and the activities designed to help achieve the objectives.

The best plans are meant to be adjusted and modified based upon the real world in which we live. Sometimes objectives need to be reduced in complexity or difficulty and sometimes boosted. Sometimes activities have to be deleted and others added with timeframes modified. The best action planning permits planned flexibility.

The most critical aspect of formative evaluation is "purpose." The purpose is to help us "self-assess" our continuing progress toward some intended outcome. Close inspection and monitoring of the planned activities usually are the key to good formative evaluation and provide sound ongoing self-assessment. The results of all formative evaluation provide excellent information for summative evaluation.

The more specific and clear the objectives, the easier summative evaluation becomes. Summative evaluation addresses the issues associated with: "Now that it's over, did I (we) accomplish what we said we would in our objectives?" It is a critical, objective, terminal appraisal of our efforts which include timelines, activities, and objectives. Obviously, objectives become the paramount focus since they embody our intended outcomes while activities and timelines are tools to help us get there.

Both formative and summative evaluation are strategic aspects of

action planning and self-assessment. To the extent to which these are developed and implemented effectively, organizational goals are reached.

Action planning and self-assessment are not panaceas for all the problems confronting an organization. They are merely tools designed to help us do things a bit better and be more accountable. Most individuals using action planning successfully find that more productive outcomes generally result, making the effort worthwhile. This is especially true when using action planning in conjunction with some sort of training which an individual is contemplating. It helps us focus on: "What specific ways will this training help me and my agency?" "What will it help us (me) do better?" In most instances, that is what everyone wants--tools to do a better job!

#### SUMMARY CONSIDERATIONS

Effective participation in a training program requires that the trainee understand clearly and specifically what knowledge and skills are to be acquired and in what way these will be applied to helping the organization achieve its goals and objectives. An action plan should be developed by the trainee prior to or in the early stages of the training program. This plan should be shared with the trainer to assist in modifying the content or focus of the program. It should also be reviewed and approved by the appropriate agency authority.

A good action plan will consist of certain essential elements including: goals; objectives; activities; timeline; and evaluation.

While goals and objectives are similar, they are different. Goals are broad general statements while objectives are highly specific and demonstrable. Objectives are technical tools designed to communicate precisely who is to do what, by when, and at what performance level. Elements of a good objective include: timeframe; responsibility fixing; behavior; and criterion.

Activities are the things that are done in order to achieve an objective. They range from simple to complex and should be viewed as means to ends. Each activity should have a timeframe associated with it in order to ensure a beginning and ending date.

Evaluation includes two major types, formative and summative, which differ in purpose and use but not necessarily in methodology. Formative evaluation provides feedback on an ongoing basis in order to make needed adjustments in the action plan. Summative evaluation provides data and information relative to terminal judgments about the achievement of stated objectives. Both formative and summative evaluation are useful tools in self-assessment.

Action planning and self-assessment are tools for helping the trainee gain the most from a training program and apply new knowledge and skills to the achievement of agency goals and objectives. Any plan should be regarded as a flexible tool to be followed carefully but adjusted whenever circumstances warrant it. No panaceas exist.

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