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How to Train for Building Communication Skills

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Elizabeth Fuseler Avery
Terry Dahlin
Deborah A. Carver

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How to Train for Building Communication Skills

SUSAN WEHMEYER

Excellent communication skills are essential in any service organization but especially so in libraries where the service provided is information. Training in communication skills can help library staff deliver more efficient and effective service, become better managers, share information to improve teamwork, and cope with new technologies that have an impact on other work skills.

Start at the Top

If you lack confidence in your own communication skills, begin with self development. Numerous books and workshops are available to address individual communication skills. Related topics that incorporate communication skills include

- motivating and empowering employees
- conducting appraisals and disciplinary reviews
- dealing with difficult people
- team building
- interviewing techniques

Setting a good example by modeling the desired behavior is also a very effective training tool.

Prepare the Foundation with Organizational Skills

Before training staff in interpersonal communications, make sure that the procedures and organizational structure of your library promote good communication. Ask yourself and your staff these questions:

Do reporting relationships and formal communication opportunities encourage and reward the flow of information in all directions? Most organizations are adept at top-down communication. It is also important that managers have a mechanism to receive information from front-line employees and for departments, units, and work groups to be able to share information laterally.

Do all staff understand the organization of the library and how their workflow has an impact on other employees? Without a thorough understanding of workflow, communication can be easily misdirected.

Do you have a system to communicate effectively with your patrons and to receive comments, suggestions, and complaints from them?

Are your mission statement, values, goals, and objectives communicated to all staff? Are departmental and individual versions of these documents shared in all directions?

Analyze Your Needs

Even if you lack the resources to provide a comprehensive training program, you should try to discover all of the areas in which training may be needed so that you can set your priorities appropriately. Take time to observe daily communications in your library. Ask yourself and your staff these questions:

Is your work atmosphere conducive to open communication? Are diverse opinions respected and accepted? Are department or work groups cooperative and communicative with one another? Would training in interpersonal relations and team building be helpful? Are misunderstandings a problem? Is training in listening or feedback skills needed?

What communication training do you provide to new employees? Does it include the necessary organizational skills discussed previously? Do new employees feel adequately prepared to interact with patrons, supervisors, subordinates, and peers? Do they receive help learning library jargon?

Are you aware of specific communication problems? Have you observed deficiencies in service or have you conducted patron satisfaction surveys that reveal problems that could be improved with better communication skills?

Is communication between management and staff adequate? Are there unresolved performance problems? Could staff motivation and morale be improved? Do the staff who provide supervision and training need or want to develop their communication skills? Do other staff need training in how to receive feedback or communicate with their supervisors?

Do you need special communication skills? Do certain staff need or want training in skills such as dealing with difficult people, assertiveness, public speaking, technical writing, Web design, telephone skills, e-mail etiquette, public relations, or reference interviewing?

Have you considered diversity issues? Do you have a need to raise understanding and awareness about nonverbal communication or the effect of culture, native language, gender, personality, characteristics, and generation on communication style?

Which needs have the greatest priority? What specific skills will be covered by training? Consider whether some or all employees will be offered the opportunity to participate in training for personal growth if the skills are not needed in their job.

Formalize Your Expectations

Prepare staff to receive training in communication skills by making sure that your performance expectations are clear about the skill levels required in various positions and how they will be evaluated. Show how the training is relevant to the job. Ask yourself and library managers these questions:

Do you include communication skills in annual performance reviews?

How do you define satisfactory performance in this area?

Do all supervisors understand what is meant by good communication skills, and do they communicate this information to the employees?

Develop a Training Program

SET GOALS

Decide what you want the outcome of the training to be. For example, if your needs assessment indicates that many telephone callers are dissatisfied with the service they receive, one of your goals might be to raise the satisfied responses by a certain percentage.

SET OBJECTIVES

Appropriate objectives will address the cause of the problem behind the goal. If dissatisfaction with your telephone service is due to poor telephone etiquette, an appropriate objective might be to teach staff the basics of telephone courtesy. If, however, the fault lies in the inability of the person who answers the telephone to refer the call properly, a better objective would be to teach staff more about the internal operation of the library. Objectives should be specific and measurable. Break the skill down into tasks or steps such as "the trainee will be able to demonstrate active listening skills to verify patron needs."

SELECT APPROPRIATE TEACHING METHODS

Self-study may be an option for some communication skills. Often training can be provided in-house. Training new employees one-on-one is an example. Various topics might be taught to small groups by a staff member who has the inclination and experience to act as a trainer. If you decide to provide an inhouse program, be sure the trainer has the needed skills. Remember that adult learners are most likely to retain and use what they learn when they can put the communication skills into practice and are involved in the training process. Other tips for a successful program include the following:

- Make sure trainees have an opportunity to help set the goals for the training session.

- Ask trainees to provide real examples of situations they would like to address.

- If possible, practice in the actual setting where the trainee will use the skill.

- Avoid the classroom lecture format. Prefer training that incorporates role-plays, simulations, case studies, and discussion.

- Make sure any audiovisual aids reinforce your objectives.

- Consider quick reference handouts to take back to the job.

- Consider videotaping a role-play or simulation for later discussion or showing a commercial audiovisual on the topic.

- Make sure everyone has a chance to practice the target skills. Break into smaller groups if necessary.

- Form trainee support groups to encourage integration of the new skills into the daily routine.

- Refresh the communication skills of previously trained employees by asking them to coach new trainees on the job.

- Don't be afraid to use on-the-job training and one-on-one coaching. In a public service area, schedule an experienced employee to work with the trainer and the trainee. This will allow

the trainee to practice a skill and then receive feedback and coaching while the experienced employee covers the service area.

Consider hiring a consultant or sending staff to off-site workshops when no experts are available in-house or when a limited number of staff need special training. Encourage trainees to discuss and demonstrate what they have learned when they return to work.

Evaluate Program Effectiveness

After the program, review the effectiveness of training. Did it help you achieve your goals? Various evaluation methods can be used:

Ask the trainees What did they think of the program: Did it meet their needs? Remember that an interesting and enjoyable program is not necessarily an effective one.

Use follow-up sessions A posttraining meeting to discuss how the training has worked in practice can also help reinforce new skills.

Use tests Consider testing trainees against the objectives both before and after the program. Did they acquire the intended skills? Possible testing methods include a written response to a case study, a demonstration, or a role-play. Remember that knowing what to do is not the same as being able to use the skill. Consider direct observation of the trainee using the communication skill on the job.

Measure the goal Has it been met? How effectively? In the telephone example above, measure whether patron satisfaction with the service has increased.

Further Reading

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