

BUILDING VALUE FROM THE GROUND FLOOR

Notable among our samples of organisations were training departments which functioned at a rudimentary level of operation, influence and status. By this we mean that they only administered the delivery of training programmes and services. Training was seen as a marginalized specialist role and not always as a credible function.

Among public sector training staff who were attempting to improve the standing of training in their organisations, a similar customer-oriented approach to developing trust among operational managers was also detectable. In some local authorities, for example, attitudes to training were seen by trainers to be primarily influenced by the role of professional groups such as teachers and social workers. Despite the fact that legislation imposes particular qualifications and continuous professional development as essential to the performance of certain jobs, the core agenda for professional training was still seen to be set nationally by these powerful occupational groups. Moreover, given an emphasis on delivering services rather than developing staff, there had been limited opportunities to train manual and clerical employees. This focus on local concerns was felt to limit the relevance that training had to local authority strategy. In one local authority, for example, the focus was upon delivering a longstanding menu of training courses, supplemented with some developments which indirectly reflected external challenges to the organisation. "We have a short course programme, which is not the central focus, but the bottom line is that there is a demand for it. So we run a wide range of courses from basic management skills through to how to run meetings, telephone skills and financial controls".

Despite these efforts to build credibility on the back of a response service to middle managers, the picture in these local authorities was of a low status and low-influence training function. In being attendants to mainly professional concerns, moving forward was seen to be especially constrained by long traditions of being unable to demonstrate the contribution of training to improving public services: "Success in training is when what has been learned is actually transferred back to the work setting and this comes back to evaluation. I am not convinced that what we do makes much difference, which is a very sad thing for a head of training to say. I know that it makes a difference to individuals. I doubt much of that actually makes a change to the bottom line in an organisation with umpteen layers of management and 12 different disciplines and professions all coming together. I tend to think of it as a federation of businesses, not as one organisation. I need to be able to prove that we are making a difference to the consumers of the services that the council provides. I have no way of doing that at the moment."

A low level of organisational credibility was frequently reflected in management acts that not only undermined training delivery but also reinforced the marginal and subservient status of the function. Last minute cancellations of staff attending training courses, for example, were common. Trainers are well versed in explanations for this. All serve to promote the function's marginal and subservient position: "They're too busy. Have too much work to do. If it's the employee, the excuse is "My manager has given me something important to do", which is usually urgent, and if it's the manager "They are much too busy, people are off work sick for several weeks". Of course, nobody thought to tell us until the day before because someone has just decided to open that particular piece of mail, somebody else is off sick and they have to cover so it's almost the employee taking responsibility for management decision because the managers, themselves, haven't made it."

In the public sector especially, the outcome of this unequal relationship was that trainers felt insecure much of the time and possessed a somewhat beleaguered view of their world:" The easy option when one is looking for cuts, is the training budget. Being local government there is always cost cutting because there is the perception that we sit in here with our feet up on the desk, drinking tea, spending public money and generally messing around. So there is constant pressure from the public, there's constant pressure from the Government to cut costs and we are an easy option, because there is not a public output for training."

What these accounts highlight is the fact that once the attendant tactic has become embedded, it may become difficult to recast the essentially subservient picture that management now has of the training function. This situation is called 'role locking'. This means that while the forging of a customer-attendant relationship is widely seen by trainers as essential to negotiating credibility from the ground floor, not least because line managers are the primary customers for training products, the training function's reputation can actually become tied to the delivery of courses on demand. Critical to the role lock, here, is the fact that line managers have a limited notion of what training should do and expect it to be confined to scheduling course delivery. Having no real input into determining training priorities means that this attendant tactic act as a barrier to the type of negotiated redefinition necessary if the function is to advance further.

Legitimate Extension Tactics

Any attempt by trainers to evolve their role and make their activities more effective and more closely linked to delivering appropriate services was seen as dependant not only on eliciting the cooperation of line managers, but also on convincing them that they have new responsibilities towards developing staff. But in trying to tackle the question of how they might break away from the attendant role, trainers often faced a host of unexpected problems. Prominent among these was the question of how long they should wait before attempting to innovate. Trainers felt that before they could feel confident enough to launch interventions to shift management perceptions, some considerable time had to elapse for the basic "shop service" to become accepted. The assumption here was that the function would need time for the respect for course delivery to build up before they would appear credible enough to attempt a more interventionary role.

We also found that trainers' initial attempts to develop a step beyond the attendant role were confined to the type of intervention that extended the shop service already established rather than negotiating challenges to management's existing training perceptions. These extension efforts were characterised by unsolicited interventions, but ones in which trainers believed that their involvement was inherently legitimate. Thus, they highlighted glaring skills omissions which they felt managers would readily support, or made offers of help to the line where training might solve particular "one-off" problems facing individual managers.

Local authorities' trainers spoke of launching attempts to extend training's remit around basic task alignments. Attempts here focused on single-issue extension tactics that aimed to systematically identify training with the needs of particular services. As elsewhere, this basic alignment required service managers to accept increased responsibility for the development of their staff. What was chosen as a legitimate issue varied between different local authority training departments and depended either on modifying popular strands from existing courses or attempts to secure interest and support from specific service managers for a particular intervention.

Moving beyond the training shop approach became problematic because even where managers appeared broadly supportive of more operationally-oriented training interventions, they would often be reluctant to accept increased personal responsibility for developing their subordinates.

Typically, trainers wanted to negotiate a redefinition of their role to include helping line managers to develop their subordinates. In practice, however, trainers found that line managers were reluctant to co-operate with this new alignment of their respective roles. Trainers quickly found that while, in principle, some managers were willing to consider a more operational emphasis to training, they were not prepared to accept any change to the established attendant-customer relationship.

The possibility of alienating managers meant that negotiating a more equal relationship was seen as a high risk strategy, especially in local authorities. This was because the penalty for failing to satisfy managers in these new efforts was perceived to be far greater than in most of the corresponding private sector companies: "The line manager's support is integral because if they are not satisfied with what we do, we are out of business."

While the attendant role is, therefore, seen by trainers as a preferred vehicle from which to kick-start the process of building the training function's credibility, it fails to develop management respect for trainers when they later wish to adopt a more interventionary stance. This occurs because trainers overestimate the value of a dependable service based on routine contact with managers. They mistakenly assume that by providing a dependable, responsive service, managers will gradually learn that their stereotypes about the training function are unjustified. Such dependability will, they believe, then elicit increased respect for themselves and the function and, ultimately, allow the negotiation of a more substantial role.

However, for a regular contact tactic to improve interpersonal relationships between trainers and middle managers, the very conditions of equal status, and social and institutional support needs to be present. Attitude change studies have routinely shown that a contact approach to reducing the salience of stereotypical categorizations between groups is most likely to succeed if the two groups enjoy similar status, and where social and institutional supports are present outside the contact initiative. It is only where these conditions apply that the parties become willing to interrelate voluntarily on a broader front than before and the salience of category membership perceptions can then reduce. Without these preconditions, even in apparently legitimate extension projects like supervisory training, managers will see trainers no differently from before and allow them little slack to negotiate a more proactive role. Because the attendant role remains intact even in the act of trying something more ambitious, any doubts or mistakes associated with these unilateral alignment initiatives will still tend to be disowned by managers as they revert to blaming the trainers and the function.

Exploiting Equal Status Through Organisational Change

The drawback of the attendant approach can be seen to essentially derive from the difficulty that trainers face in trying to unilaterally realign the purpose of training. Their relationship with management remains a subservient one because from a position of unequal status it is difficult, if not impossible, to convince line managers that they have anything to gain from granting trainers more trust, say or resources. In particular, managers see trainers here as a threat which could thwart line authority with the generation of better ideas. Such ideas are seen to be in competition with line managers' notions and values. To participate, therefore, would be to admit some deficiency in their work or themselves.

The nature of these setbacks to negotiation are further refined by the fact that where trainers did feel that they had made some headway beyond a provider role, they had been able to exploit the external appearance of a common goal or threat facing both line management and themselves. Thus, it tended to be only when powerful line managers or groups could see that an equal partnership with training could be personally beneficial that the training function was able to exploit the chance to step out of its established role. What was crucial here was that the

sustained support of a powerful management group protecting trainers from other managers' attempts to undermine this new approach. This support was repaid by trainers helping to convince senior levels that line managers were making progress towards developing staff capability in line with organisational needs: "We have a training plan for the first time. At budget time last year we worked with managers to identify and prioritise their key training needs. We looked to see where there were common needs across the company and then talked to senior management to check that it fitted with their plans for the company."

While the culture of local government has made change difficult, in recent years restructuring and new financial pressures have acted as a stimulus to some authorities to consider ever more radical solutions. Closely following the 1996 local government reorganisation, one authority reduced the number of its manual and clerical employees by about 10 per cent. Despite these reductions the council remained top heavy and there was considerable anxiety throughout middle management about the future. Given these common threats, the head of training put together a management support network with two other heads of service that created a broader influence base within the organisation. "We decided that we needed something that allowed us to talk to each other because normally we only met each other during meetings. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude that all successful collaborations relied on exploiting the personal anxieties of line managers under pressure from top management. One training function improved its status relative to line management by being seen to step outside its usual remit in a public role, quite separate from the local authority. Here a training service under threat of closure successfully organised a series of public management conferences. Ostensibly, these were run for council staff but by marketing the conferences between local businesses and other parts of the public sector they were able to attract influential speakers. The ensuing publicity was so successful in raising the profile and valuation of training that the head of personnel's offer to cut the training budget by 50 per cent at the next budget review was rejected. The effect of this was to create some dissonance in the received management view. Some realignment of management's internal attitude took place because the longstanding attendant role was set against the current public proactivity and success of the management conferences. Unlike the use of unilateral extension tactics, therefore, the force for change here stemmed particularly from management's voluntary participation. In choosing to participate in the conference, managers not only did not feel threatened by this initiative, but also the cause of their dissonance was attributed to misplaced views about the training function.

Consequently, while these organisations lacked a mature development culture, alliancing on issues of common uncertainty and threat still became possible because these superordinate problems reduced the traditional inequality of status between training and middle management. For these trainers, shared threats, in particular, helped to close part of the status gap in the established relationship with the line. Under these conditions trainers could find a more receptive audience among managers who until then had asserted their superiority and independence over the training function. As one senior trainer put it: "We had a very suspicious organisation. We tapped into people who we knew had the potential to be change agents. We started talking to them about the fundamentals of their role and that was the first time in many cases that anyone had ever said "Oh this is what your role is, this is where you fit in". We weren't telling them, "this is the only way, this is the right way, there are options". And I think it was such a different approach. It really hit a wave of optimism. And people were going back and doing a sales pitch for us ... The critical mass that has built up has given me the influence to get a senior management programme in. I know it's devious but it works."

But while trainers felt some progress had been made, they were also well aware that their achievements did not, by themselves, constitute a transformation of the function's position. They acknowledged that their successes so far had only established a few common projects from which to build their credibility. Basing the function's mobility around single concerns was thus

recognised as a fragile foundation for advance, not least because in all of these scenarios key features and assumptions of the training shop approach persisted in parallel with the new initiatives. There is, therefore, a crucial limitation here; namely that alliances of this sort may only stimulate dissonance, which elicits a change in one aspect of management attitudes to training. Although optimistic that they could build further, doubts about the extent of change to line attitudes were echoed by many trainers: "It's a basic attitude towards training and development; you're part of the ivory tower that sits up there and doesn't actually know "what we do here". And we are trying to get better at that and actually know more what the business is doing and are making some efforts to do that. I would say that people who have been pretty anti are actually coming around and there is much more of a feeling of partnership beginning to develop." "It won't come as any great shock that whenever budgets are being looked at, or if there is a need to cut back, the first two areas that go are marketing and training. That is always an uphill battle. By and large we have been very well supported by our executive but there are times, when the chips are down, when it is very difficult to defend your position and we don't like that too much."

In this respect, this form of advance is best seen as a partial and possibly tenuous adjustment to specific problems which could easily fall back once the salience of these issues fades.

Maintaining and Enhancing High Status

We were unable to find any public sector organisations among our sample where the training department currently claims to have a key role in forming the organisation's strategy. However, there were examples of private sector training functions where trainers felt that they occupied a key role in the management and direction of the organisation's business. Nevertheless, even here it may still be difficult for training to maintain its standing over the long term. Private sector businesses have the independence to decide how to deploy their resources, though this is constrained by the need to maximise profitability, retain the confidence of shareholders and address the concerns of other key stakeholders. Given the requirement to be profitable it is relatively easy to assess the effectiveness of core operational activities by the use of management accounting systems. This is less so in the case of training where it is difficult to establish its contribution to key financial performance criteria. Private sector training may also be more important at certain times in an organisation's life than at others. For example, an organisation with a modest or poor performance record may decide to re-invent itself with a major investment in products or productive processes. This frequently means changes in the size of the workforce and the jobs they perform. If, as we have seen, these scenarios lead to quite narrow and fragile advances, the question arises as to what features are necessary for trainers to feel that high status has become relatively widespread in the organisation and embedded as a long-term feature. We thus turn now to examining how trainers account for the long-term widening of the training function's status.

Where trainers felt that they had been able to establish a widespread status and influence, three conditions were thought to be crucial. To begin with, establishing high status was believed to be assisted by a high-profile set of new organisational circumstances that favours training. That is, training becomes a strategic contingency or, put differently, an activity that is seen as essential for attaining organisational goals. Here, training's new influence is seen to emerge in part as a response to new management priorities and values which have spread to everyday routines in the organisation. A particular training vision is sponsored by senior management and becomes widely promoted as crucial to the success of the organisation. In these organisations much of the centrality of training was reflected in the passing down of a common vocabulary and perspective on its role in the organisation. Support from top management was always seen as a precondition for high status, but, more importantly, training was seen to have become a relatively permanent priority that was now crucial to the way the organisation should operate.

High status was, therefore, conditional in part on senior and line management's belief that a skills revolution among the workforce was now essential to the attainment of high organisational performance.

As a result of an extensive reorganisation, senior management applied greater pressure to all parts of the organisation, including training, to contribute more to overall success. "If you go back ten years ago, when I first joined, demands on people's time were not as great as they are now. So the training manager at the time used to say it was the warm bath syndrome. People used to sign up for two or three days so it was just away from the desk. It was so relaxing to be away and meet some people you haven't seen for a while and you get a free lunch thrown in and somebody will be telling you something that might be of interest." In contrast, there is now a greater focus on performance and results and, in particular, on how people spend their time. This is reflected in the attitudes of line managers to releasing staff for training. "We publicise a three-day course and half the managers were coming back saying "can't you put it down to two? Why is it three, why not two?"

This organisation's new emphasis on developing skills for the business has done much to bolster the position of training. It has allowed the formulation of policies and procedures that emphasise the contribution of training to key activities of the organisation. There is also greater coherence between training and business objectives through the use of divisional and departmental training plans.

But however important this senior management support was to ensuring abroad support for training issues, trainers in this type of setting were convinced that the continuance of a high status training culture relied on two other factors. The first was the need for trainers to continually search for ways to visibly demonstrate how their activities contribute to the organisation's core strategy and performance.

Knowing the impact of training on business results, for example, was seen to allow better decisions to be made about the investment of resources. There was accordingly an emphasis upon continuing to demonstrate the contribution of training to business performance. This was associated with finding more effective ways of providing the training service, such as minimising training time away from the job, as well as finding ways to provide all this with fewer trainers. Trainers have to devote considerable resources to this problem and for some interventions have been able to show impressive correlations with business performance. Much has depended upon having precise training targets.

One of the difficulties they initially faced was how to make effective use of the organisation's existing information system. By pressing the commitment of top management's support, trainers have been successful in getting more sophisticated tracking systems introduced that have improved the process: "If you are talking about developing something new we can then say "well, okay what are the outcomes? What do you expect to see as a difference?" And you make sure that is tracked. So we are able to superimpose the information coming from the business in terms of results and we will be able to use control groups and so on."

An important feature of the reciprocal relationship with line management, therefore, can be seen in terms of how trainers develop ways in which to share the financial responsibility for training. Because line managers remain concerned about overhead costs for training, trainers can work to very transparent targets of days for delivery and for design so that their cost competitiveness as compared to external providers is never in question. Through a buyer and supplier partnership, departments plan their training needs with training staff. Given knowledge of the cost of different kinds of courses in terms of person/days the line managers can: "Tell us roughly what they are looking to spend and we will then tell them what that would buy them in

terms of training days. Then they need to say "well that's not enough" and we will tell them how much more they will need to put into the pot."

In this process, the manager's role is seen as crucial to the identification of relevant training needs through the use of an annual performance appraisal procedure which looks at the individual's aspirations, how their job may change and what training is required. Indeed, managers themselves are now appraised in terms of their performance in developing their subordinates." If a manager didn't encourage people to do the right skills training for the group and people couldn't do their job because they hadn't been trained to use a bit of equipment that would reflect in their department's performance."

Although training is given a high priority, it can be seen that training's right to a key role is still in part dependant on offering "hard" evaluations of their activity. Yet, however innovative such evaluation methods appear to be. They nevertheless still focus on financial criteria like cost efficiency rather than on demonstrating the unique contribution of training. The trainers in high status functions recognised this problem and did not rely exclusively on these financial assessments of training value. The third and final factor they identified focused on this need to demonstrate their value in other ways. This task was tackled by tailoring their innovations to socially reconstruct the place of training. Thus, even where business value had become identified with the role of training, the maintenance of this status was perceived by senior training practitioners to also be contingent on a continual launch of initiatives which attempted to shift the ways in which training's value was understood in the organisation. The development of training initiatives, therefore, was not merely about providing fixed solutions of proven content, but also about attempts to embellish and enhance the construction of key trainers' activities and skills. In this sense, the transformation to high status and influence was always closely linked to the perceived charisma of particular training leaders. This type of personal charisma was seen to be enacted through the introduction of a succession of high profile innovations which tried to influence the way the organisation operates.

Senior trainers can work as performance improvement consultants in the business. Their task is to help determine what new products and processes will take the business forward and to embed training in their realisation. Practitioners here attempt to promote training not merely as a way to improve the management of functional performance but also in terms of how it can shape change in perceptions about the employment relationship. In this respect, training staff have been key influencers on the way that training delivery has changed in recent years from face-to-face to distance learning. Given new cost and market pressure, the problem of releasing employees from their normal jobs to go on courses became more acute. For example, in a large bank, distance learning materials were written internally in conjunction with subject experts to produce more than 90 workbooks covering most areas of banking practice, as well as some management skills. In the last three years about 35,000 workbooks have been issued to staff. This shift has not only provided a more efficient way of delivering training but is also seen to assist in legitimising the notion that employees have a responsibility to develop themselves. In this sense, these charismatic leaders of training see their role as creating a climate of change. "I think for the first time people are able to identify their needs through the performance management system and get, if you like, an instant fix to that. Instead of requesting a course and waiting until the next one comes up they can access it immediately. They can learn in a way that suits them best and it is working very well; people are really taking control now over their own learning for the first time."

Thus, in trying to socially reconstruct their contribution to the business, the role of training continues to evolve mainly outside of conventional training applications. There is a move away from standardising training content and an emphasis on utilising trainers' expertise in the

provision of knowledge solutions. At this level, the trainers' expertise becomes the content of training.

Influential trainers thus believe that the source of their status cannot be attributed solely to positive changes in training values among top management. Rather, if high status training is to become embedded within the organisation, trainers feel that they also need to continually develop new ways to assess their contribution on conventional criteria and to innovate through charismatic agents of training knowledge. This emphasis on the personal qualities of charismatic training agents is central to understanding the influence process because any perceived dependence on their contribution raises questions about the prospects for maintaining high status. In stressing the personal qualities of key trainers, the notion of high value training cannot be linked just to a stable set of tasks or training content, whatever their merits. Indeed, where innovative training content did become accepted as a routine part of the training scene, responsibility for its maintenance was then passed down to less prestigious trainers. This means that for the charismatic role to continue to be highly regarded, it needs to be regularly validated by progressive waves of innovation. And so, in this sense, the verdict on training always comes down to the latest project. That is, training value is always emerging and, in being subject to the orchestration of impressions, is never complete or fully proven.

In sum, while there is some evidence of the way that high status training functions account for their credibility, their position is never entirely fixed or established. Protecting their status relies on staying in control of an unfolding dramatic performance characterised by the search for new training commodities that are expected to add value to the business. Unlike other established functions like accounting, there is less reliance on the application of skills and knowledge that can be permanently relied on to justify their worth, and more on an evolving construction of training as a knowledge commodity. The prospect of having to continually reinvent your contribution in this way means that high status may be seen as a never-ending burden as well as an important objective.

Conclusion

Training functions that made either modest or significant advances in influence only did so where there was some management mandate for narrowing the existing status gap between management and the training function. Typically, supportive climates were created by threats to existing line management assessment or more widely to the organisation itself, which focused on the need to improve the competitiveness of the workforce's skills.

Nevertheless, while support for training renewal was crucial to the launching of innovation projects, this was insufficient by itself to advance and sustain the respect of the function. Competitive threats that highlighted skills and performance deficiencies provided training with the foundation for some much needed authority, but trainers also had to win management's cooperation for particular innovations if they were to build their credibility. Workable influence, therefore, was ultimately reliant on engendering a line management dependency on training practitioners, rather than on instances of vertical authority.

The key determinant of such dependency was seen to be the emergence of special individuals within the training function who were not only capable of nurturing reciprocal power through appropriate horizontal exchanges with the line, but also of continually recharging their role as experts in the change process. It may not always be possible to identify such individuals within the training department or, for that matter, from the wider organisation. By the same token, the status of this expertise was found to need regular renewal. Even in functions where training possessed some strategic status, the necessity to update the skills of charismatic trainers quickly surfaced. This was partly because of the perceived need to progressively innovate, but also

because the nature of this type of knowledge requires that it be shared both with line managers and the organisation. Given this need to publicly donate aspects of their knowledge, trainers risk losing their exclusive claim to particular forms of expertise, unless they pursue a policy of replenishment. The contingent and reciprocal features of this form of dependency, therefore, suggest that trainers' power is less protected and reusable than in functions like accounting, production and engineering.

Outside of routine course delivery, project work represents the main avenue for training innovation, and this in itself provides both advantages and disadvantages to widening the function's influence. Given a supportive climate, the present research found that single-issue projects were sometimes an effective means by which to widen influence. But the findings also showed that trainers are often left with some unease that any gains made will falter or regress once the current problem is resolved. In high status training departments too, the contingent character of project work means that staying successful depends on the ability of trainers to demonstrate value and replenish their stock of projects to meet shifting management priorities. The result is that training's role is likely to be more unified than in personnel, and also more polarised between administrative delivery and a strategic solutions approach.

Attempts to advance the role of training: process and context
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