

The complete trainer



A trainer adds many strings to his bow as he moves from administrator to manager, say **Barry Johnson** and **Mandy Geal**

// "I'll introduce you to our learning and development manager," is a usual statement for us to hear, but it is not always clear what the role involves or what skills the person doing it might have.

Our experience is that we can be meeting anybody from a direct trainer, an internal consultant or a sophisticated training administrator to an HR generalist with responsibility for the training and progression processes. Of course, many of the people

we meet are rounded L&D professionals.

There is also confusion in what words mean in different organisations. What is certain is this article is not going to solve that problem. Back in 2003 we did look at this problem in an historical context¹. We'll use the term 'trainer' in this article as shorthand for all the different titles we meet and we must admit to having held a range of titles in our careers. We will explore the breadth of functions of the professional trainer. Competence

in these functions is the mark of a complete trainer.

Where do trainers come from?

Trainers tend to emerge from the ranks of people who have a depth of skill in a craft or profession who wish to pass on what they have learned.

Some come from one of two routes in 'administration'. Firstly there are those that administer training within the HR function. They have a great advantage: they are normally highly educated in the theory and processes of people



The nature of the trainer

Those that are successful trainers have some extraordinary characteristics. They are usually well above average intelligence. They must be able to apply their intellect to understanding the material and skills so that people can perform and they must be able to put it in a form that enables others to learn.

But intellect is insufficient to be a proficient trainer. Trainers require personal qualities too. They must understand, and relate to, those they would help to learn. They must nurse the stupid, nurture the talented, guide the bewildered, control the aggressive, interest the indifferent, challenge the brilliant, and do all this while appearing even-handed.

Yes, the trainer must be *A Man for all Seasons* or a parallel Superwoman.

Having found the person that would be a trainer, somebody must teach him the art and craft of being a professional in that chosen profession. Below we will explore what constitutes the trainer's world and the ways in which trainers most often grow.

The trainer must be *A Man for all Seasons* or a parallel Superwoman

One of the concepts that all trainers must hold onto tightly is that people make profits – a blindingly obvious statement. It follows that the more competent the employees of the organisation are, the more likely the organisation is to prosper in the short term and survive in the longer term.

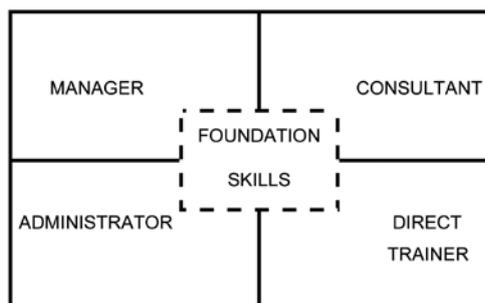
This underpinning also requires areas such as psychology. Trainers need the foundations of behaviour as expounded through behaviourism, psychodynamics, the humanistic approach, social behaviour, personality and learning theory. We're not suggesting that trainers should be psychologists but we are suggesting that a range of elements from that body of knowledge acts as an enabler of more specific skill elements that underpin training processes.

Some foundation knowledge relates directly to the job environment of the trainees such as marketing, sales, design, development, production, logistics, customer support and finance. All these relate to the functioning of the organisation and its interaction with its suppliers and customers. Training is always set in a context and this functional list indicates some of the contextual environments of which the trainer must be aware and ideally use with the appropriate learners.

The foundation is, we suggest, more than just skills. It contains an element about values and beliefs. The values relate to the needs of the people who serve the organisation. The belief is that trainers are a major contributor to the current profitability and future survival of the organisation that employs them.

Let's not get this out of perspective. If the training

Role/skill elements of a professional trainer



Foundation skills

The foundation skills underpin aspects of the four main roles of the training profession. As an example, let's consider finance. The administrator may prepare and monitor the budget for the manager, and advise the consultant on costing. The direct trainer must understand the impact on the business of the skills taught. All four roles need basic financial knowledge.

From the US Civil Service Commission's Bureau of Training

management and have observed first-hand the reality of people management and the virtues and sins of the employed. They have vicariously experienced many line roles and those who become trainers have a clear and critical eye.

The second group doesn't have these advantages. They emerge from hard toil in the clerical functions; however office automation and organisational restructuring have led administrative assistants to assume responsibilities once reserved for managerial and professional staff.

function is made redundant today, it may take some time before the effects are even noticed but, if the function is not restored, as sure as little apples are round the organisation is doomed.

The direct trainer

Initially, direct trainers teach what they have experienced but this situation does not last. Work moves on and these trainers are required to teach the potential doers of it that which is new, and they do this encumbered by the knowledge that they have never done that which they now train.

They make a profound discovery: that, once proficient in the art and science of training, trainees accept that their trainers appear to know, and be able to do, what they instruct. Having made this profound discovery, the now-proficient direct trainer moves on into the realms of instructing that which was totally unknown to him in the not-too-distant past.

Many trainers have undergone this change. This adventure keeps them in the grip of the training profession when they have the talent for more lucrative roles.

When people think of training, they tend to think of the direct trainer. They think of the person that led the group in which they participated as a learner. If you were to ask this participant what the trainer did, he is likely to give an answer in terms of the presentation of information. It is extraordinary how this is the response even when the learning event was almost totally experiential.

The consequence of this is that direct trainers tend to be undervalued, and many participants believe they can do what the direct trainer does. It may be true, but we would say in the trainers' defence that perhaps they just make it look easy or, perhaps, they make such a dog's breakfast of it that the aspiring trainer just knows he can do better.

So what is it that the direct trainer does and what does he



There is much more to being a direct trainer than the confidence and ability to present

need in order to do it? The answers to the question are various so let's look at a simple systematic approach without detail.

Direct trainers conduct needs analysis. This normally starts with some sort of wish, such as 'I wish my staff could do this job' or even 'I wish I could do this job'. From this depressing statement of the situation, the trainer finds

out what is needed. He looks at the target population and divines the entry-level behaviour. From the training time available and other constraints, he produces learning objectives that, when met, will move the learners towards meeting the required needs. He then designs the learning event that uses the appropriate learning and trainer styles² for the target population. He delivers the event and assesses the results.

Each of these elements requires a whole range of skills, which go un-noted by the learning population, apart from the delivery of the training itself.

Delivery is, of course, a whole different ball game. The direct trainer is managing the learning



and part of that is managing the relationship with the group, with individuals within the group and the relationship between the group members.

You now will recognise that there is much more to being a direct trainer than the confidence and ability to present. The skills include orator, comedian and actor, interrogator, advocate, judge and subject matter expert. This is a range of skills that may make an astronaut blanch.

Content is usually the least of the problems. The real skill is getting people to overcome their learning inhibitions, psychological barriers and lack of intellectual power so they can acquire the skills and knowledge that will be

useful to them as employees of the organisation and necessary for them to advance their careers.

It is meeting this challenge and watching people grow that is the real payoff for the direct trainer. It is more than a job. It is a vocation.

Administrator

There is a misconception that training administration is some sort of clerical job. This misunderstanding is understandable as some are and that is what is often seen or assumed by people coming into superficial contact with them. We're not going to suggest that all training administrators do what we outline below. Let's start bottom up and see what emerges.

The clerical administrator starts with the paperwork, producing a series of documents. These include training notes, joining instructions, course lists, letters to venues, clients and suppliers, etc. This level of administrator usually acts as a clerical assistant to direct trainers, consultants and managers, taking and passing on telephone and verbal messages, finding and filing documents. This is like a clerical administrator in any other department.

He manages the library and the loaning of learning materials. He also manages the education interfaces and ensures that the rules that relate to educational courses are abided by.

Soon he is handling problems: people can't attend a course; people didn't attend so why are they being charged; my manager didn't tell me I was going on a course so why do I have this letter; my manager told me I was going on this course so why haven't I got joining instructions, etc.

This is the crunch learning time. This is the point at which the decision is made as to whether this person is going to make it or not. So what is the 'crunch'? It is being able to handle people who are concerned, worried, confused, annoyed and downright incensed.

So having handled the clerical side and acquired the insightful skills of handling a variety of people in a variety of situations, the next move is into an advisory role. Line managers ring them up and ask them questions such as: "Do you know of a course for 'bottom knocking'?"

The administrator soon learns who does such a course, which are the best suppliers, how much it would cost, when the next one might be, who to talk to for further information and who are the subject matter experts within the organisation. It's not long before managers realise that it is useful to talk to him.

This paves the way for the next step in his development. He goes

out and assesses venues, meets the venue administrators and soon he is booking the venues and ensuring they are meeting the required standards. He handles the negotiations on pricing and gets discounts.

Now he has started to handle the sharp end of finance, he gains an understanding and contributes to budgetary discussions. He also starts to monitor the budgets. Training administrators often handle the financial transactions for the training business.

They are the core of the function, making all the procedures, routines and operational interfaces operate effectively and efficiently.

Consultants

Some administrators and direct trainers take a route into consultancy. For some direct trainers, this is in name only as they are really freelance trainers. What elements do administrators and direct trainers add to their skills portfolio to become internal or external consultants?

There are a number of areas – organisation development, executive coaching, assessment (centres and psychometrics), personal coaching, process design and implementation to name the key ones – that come out of the training function. Some of these require the gathering of additional skill sets such as psychometrics and NLP. Some trainers take an additional qualification such as an MSc or MA to facilitate the transfer into consultancy.

So what will you find these consultants doing? Like direct training, there is a systematic approach that calls upon a range of interpersonal and interactive skills developed in the direct trainer and training administrator roles. Let's overview this process.

Initially there is an opening process that is often called entry. Fundamental to this is developing a relationship and that requires empathy. As empathy is achieved,



The complete trainer is a vital cog in organisational success and, in the present climate, recovery

the relationship builds so that the consultant can establish credibility and, through that, authority.

Now he can move forward to scoping and defining the project. He is now into diagnosis, which includes gathering background information to uncover the real nature of the problems and define the specification for the desired outcome.

It may be a truism to say that all successful consultancy is about change. Change requires three main elements: evaluating options, identifying the solutions and generating commitment to those solutions. Often much influence is required as the diagnosed and identified solutions may not be what the client had in mind.

Now the consultant is working in the area of implementation. He has to sustain momentum: change is tough and meets overt and covert resistance. He is monitoring progress and influencing to ensure momentum is maintained. As the outcomes are achieved, he questions whether they are effective and recommends modifications and adjustments.

Now we are into the maintenance phase. There is often

a tendency for reversion into the previous situation so maintenance is essential until the new situation is firmly grounded.

Training manager

The training manager is normally a training professional in the above elements. To these skill areas, he has added management and, ideally, leadership skills.

Conclusion

Let us just conclude by making some obvious points. Trainers are very special people but many people who now hold that title in companies are only doing one element of the professional job. What we have written above is what constitutes the complete trainer – a vital cog in organisational success and, in the present climate, recovery. ■

Other sources

1. The Training of Trainers Committee of the MSC (circa 1970s) and the US Civil Service Commission's Bureau of Training (circa 1970s).

References

1. "Training, development and education: well, what is the difference?" *Training Journal* November 2003
2. "Trainer Styles" *Train the Trainer* Issue 31 2005 Fenman Ltd

Barry Johnson is a retired director of Learning Partners Ltd, now a part-time consultant, and **Mandy Geal** is a director of Learning Partners Ltd. They can be contacted via www.learningpartners.co.uk