

8 Ways to Get the Most **BANG** from Your Training Bucks

By Donna Clapp

When waging the war for talent, competitive salaries, benefits, and assignments are the obvious lures. But what about retention? Relaxing after you've nabbed the best and the brightest is a big mistake. The mistake made during tough economic times such as the one we're in now is to overlook the need for training and development opportunities for these new hires. Today's up-and-comers know employment for life is out of the question, but expect you'll provide employability for life by offering growth opportunities.

All this at a time when corporate budgets have been squeezed tighter than a drum. Training and development has always taken a hit at times like these—after all, it's an expendable "luxury." Or is it? The irony is that as organizations downsize they need talent more than ever. If a company really wants to do more with less it has to spend energy and resources ensuring productivity remains high, employees are as versatile as possible, and managers are given the tools needed to lead an anxious and demoralized workforce.

"It's an expensive proposition to recruit and hire only to have your best people leave after 18 months because they feel as if they're stagnating," says Dr. Lois Frankel, president of the Pasadena, CA-based consulting firm Corporate Coaching International. "Training and development doesn't have to be expensive and elaborate. With a little ingenuity managers can really stretch their budgets." She suggests choosing several of the following options as a way to let employees know professional development is on your radar screen.

- 1. Identify community resources.** Local therapists, financial planners or other subject matter experts throughout the community would love the opportunity to speak before a group of employed professionals. No fee is involved—the quid pro quo is the knowledge some people in the audience may later call them for service. It's free advertising. Develop a noontime speaker's series using these people as guest speakers on subjects of interest to your staff. The caveat is to clearly communicate to the speaker that there can be no "selling" from the platform.
- 2. Tap your biggest vendors.** "As the president of a consulting firm I know that when a core client asks us to do a half-day 'freebie' we accommodate the request," says Frankel. Don't be embarrassed to contact your biggest vendors and ask each of them to provide you with some training-related service that you can share with your staff. You get the benefit of their expertise and they know you'll remember them when the business picture changes.
- 3. Negotiate.** Don't expect to get a three-day team-building program for half-price—you'll only insult the consultant and damage what may have been a mutually beneficial relationship. But do talk about your limited resources and ask

the firm to work with you to develop a program or design a project that fits your budget.

4. **Request train-the-trainer programs.** Ask that your own employees be used as co-facilitators so they can learn the program content. Similarly, keep in mind that you've paid for the materials. Request the right to use these in future programs facilitated by internal staff. This saves considerable research and development time. Again, the primary concern of a consultant is exposure and repeat business, so offer to put his or her name (or the name of the consulting firm) on every page you use.
5. **Have internal staff "shadow" consultants.** Not all training and development is done in a workshop or class. There are conflict resolution interventions, organizational development discussions, retreats, and coaching sessions. Another way to develop your internal staff is to have them participate in meetings outside consultants have with your management. You get more for your money by developing internal expertise that can be used throughout your organization. "Good consulting firms won't balk at this request," Frankel asserts. "They know that during better economic times internal staff prefer not to do the work of the outside consultant and the pendulum will eventually swing the other way.
6. **Make use of local graduate programs.** Contact a university with an organization development department within the school of business or psychology and ask the dean if he or she will take "real time" projects for students. For example, developing plans for a reorganization where you would typically use outside consultants could be a perfect case study for a team of graduate students. Graduate students often have significant business experience in addition to their education. You benefit not only from their wisdom and experience but also that of the professors who oversee the project.
7. **Hold staff accountable for the learning experience.** Don't be taken in by staff who attend training programs just to have a day off. Instruct people to prepare a brief presentation to the other members of the team on what they learned and how it can be applied to the current work situation. Similarly, sit down with staff members after they have participated in any kind of development activity and discuss the lessons learned and how the company will benefit from the investment.
8. **Develop a learning library.** Find a small area where you can keep books, videotapes, audiotapes, magazines, and articles for employees to check out. If you write to some authors they may even donate copies of their books.

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