

In Tough Times, Don't Let Learning Lapse

by Terry Lauter Comp and Larry Comp



The Problem

Admittedly, it's tempting. As budget slashing continues in many organizations today, reducing the company's training/development expenses **seems** logical. In reality, though, we are once again mortgaging the future for decidedly short-term improvements in the numbers. While the budget battle rages on in the executive ranks, consider these simple, key strategies for getting the best bang for your buck in the area of learning and development.

Use Short, Tightly-Focused Modules

First, make your position clear: let your managers and employees know that they are still valued by the organization, and their growth and development will not be sacrificed during the belt-tightening. Perhaps you are no longer able to afford to send people to outside training programs as needed. And maybe budget cuts have eliminated the staff or the dollars to develop and present daylong or multi-day sessions on the inside. *Focus on what you can deliver.* Simply develop a **regular** schedule (monthly, bi-monthly, or even quarterly) when you will consistently make learning happen in short bursts. Use tightly focused workshops of 1 – 3 hours to build skills, allow people to collaborate cross-functionally, and re-ignite the team. Research tells us that people learn best when it is in short, regularly-spaced segments, and retention soars when learners are actively engaged. Use these adult-learning principles to your advantage, while sticking to your commitment to do something regular and consistent with the people who are working to turn things around for your organization.

Make Learning Relevant

Thinking back to the “good ole’ days” when training dollars were flowing freely, one of the biggest mistakes made by organizations was rushing outside to buy “canned or packaged” training products to implement as a turnkey solution to building skills. While these products often feature quality content, retention is less than optimal, simply because learners don't see the relevance and connection to your specific organizational environment. Since you might not be able to afford the packaged products anyway, whittle down the learning objectives, and find as many ways as possible to integrate your unique culture and values message into all of your organizational processes, systems, and programs. For example, if leading a workshop on recruitment and selection, make sure that you are teaching how it's done in your organization, and how you select the best fit for your unique culture. In other words, make sure that the participant walks in the door with a clear understanding of how **what** they are learning right now connects to their job in your organization,---not some vague, generic theory that might be useful somewhere, someday.

Strive for Transparency

During this time when economic challenges abound, employees and their managers quite naturally feel wary and insecure. Trust people enough to be truthful and open about your situation, and what you are trying to accomplish. Let them know that you want to continue to invest in their development for the future, but in a way that is responsible. Tell participants what the total costs are for the training sessions (including the cost of their time!) Explain what they can do to help deliver a significant return on the investment, so that executives will be motivated to continue to fund your initiatives.

Find Efficiencies

Short, focused training sessions generally cost less than the alternatives, but sometimes increase the “soft cost” because of the need to get people together more frequently. Provide the training schedule at the beginning of the year, and make sure that attendance is prioritized. Look for ways to use the latest technological tools to help include individuals in field locations in the sessions. Use webinars, teleconferences, and e-learning options, especially when highly interactive training is not required. Keep in mind that much of what we need to provide is information and communication, and information sharing can be done quite effectively using technology. Know what’s available in the marketplace, and continuously re-evaluate the “how” in order to keep everyone in the loop.

Conclusion

In the real world, cuts in training budgets are periodically required. When this happens, however, opportunities are often discovered to improve the ROI on training expenditures. Consider these tips for maximizing your results:

- Decide on your most important learning objectives, and deliver short, tightly- focused workshops that are highly engaging.
- Adhere to a regular schedule, so that participants sense a serious, ongoing commitment to their development.
- Customize content to your organization, so that learners see the relevance and the connection to their day-to-day responsibilities.
- Strive for transparency with employees and managers. Communicate often and clearly about your training goals, and the part that each staff member plays in attaining them.
- Look for opportunities to leverage new technology to reach employees in remote locations.
- If budget cuts impose travel restrictions, use conference calls, webinars, and e-learning methods to provide a cost-effective alternative to face-to-face sessions.

In the end, providing an environment of continuous learning and growth will help you to realize a much-improved return on investment for your training and development budget. Certainly, your employees will appreciate your commitment, and many will grow and thrive in this cost-cutting era.

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