



A TRAINING MAP FOR UNCHARTED TERRITORY

When it comes time to hiring new staff, here's how to tackle how we train them — with a whole new set of potential constraints.



By Christina Salwitz

Up is down, out is in, and gray is the new black and white in our unique business. Obviously, I'm not saying something you're not already feeling. We're all trying to read "Moby Dick" during our summer break, but it turns out we got the Braille edition and we're all flailing about doing the best we can to interpret what it means.

But, the good news if you're game to play along with me here, is that this new world we find ourselves in wasn't created in 1984 even though it might feel rather Orwellian. Can you imagine not having the internet for sales, for your informational blogs and newsletters, for the best and most up-to-date information during a crisis?

Because of the editorial deadlines, I'm still in lockdown (Day 43!) as I write this — and assume I will be here in Seattle until at least the first week of May or possibly June, so my crystal ball for where we'll be when you read this is still foggy. We still have to prepare and assume life WILL get back to normal, we will be hiring new staff at some point and we still need to know how to tackle how we train them with a whole new set of potential constraints.

Focusing on the Faces You Don't See

People buy from people. The face of our garden center (both figuratively and literally) is such a huge source of pride and we work so hard to make sure we manage our first impressions in person. We focus on our smiles, making connections acknowledging loyalty, so why do those elements get left behind so often with online interactions, phone orders or drive-through service?

Believe it or not, this is your IGC's chance to truly shine. By their nature, big box stores can NOT do this, so IGCs get to own this opportunity for service excellence. New employees don't know who your best customers are, what they look like, what they like to focus on, when they tend to shop or how much they're likely to spend. But if you can tweak your training to include this kind of information, when Mrs. Jones calls in a delivery order of \$500, the person taking the order is going to make that personal connection, ask her how her family is doing, and reinforce why Mrs. Jones loves shopping at XYZ garden center.

"They feel like home. They understand me, anticipate my needs and genuinely care about my gardening success," she might say.

Offer to snap a quick photo of Mrs. Jones when she gets her delivery or picks up her order, get her permission to share it and print it out for a Wall of Fame (either in the lunchroom

or somewhere else) with some general info about her where everyone can get to know what makes Mrs. Jones tick. Watch her face light up or hear her thrilled voice when an employee she's never worked with knows her name! It's a win-win for everyone!

Productivity Matters More than Ever Now

As a business right now, if you have any fingernails left, it's a wonder to behold. We're all scrambling to keep the flow and our heads above water. So, how can you possibly monitor productivity right now? Is it simply sales and moving product? Of course, that's a valuable 99% focus right now, but I'd also say that if you're not being crystal clear about accountability and goals for your team, even a group of bright, capable, motivated people can get off-track easily.

Has this ever happened to you? You meet with your team to discuss a pesky issue. Everyone nods when you ask if you've come to an agreement and a course of action. Then they walk out of the room. The problem is that everyone leaving that room is at a different level of alignment, some higher than others. But you won't know that until days or weeks down the road when results aren't achieved. As you're doing a post-mortem on the situation, you discover the team was never really aligned in the first place.

The answer? Start making FAST strategic training videos on the fly! Don't overthink it, don't try to make it perfect; just make it:

- F=Frequent
- A=Accurate info
- S=Strategic
- T=Timely

Video has never been a more proactive and easy training tool. You can send them out via text, email or even a Facebook group for your team. Be sure to ask your employees what type of learner they see themselves as; this is very helpful in how you approach each topic video. If you take this "storytime videos" method and tie it in to specific customer situations, it sinks in even more. It's relatable for the employee and for the results you're trying to achieve.

This simple method gives you the ability to address individual learning methods. Some people are hands-on learners, so maybe your training video requires them to pick up, feel, inspect, etc., certain plants, tools and so on, then you can check with them to test that they DID in fact go to see, feel, and experience XYZ plants or process and experience it for themselves.

Others might be visual learners who will get the info in an instant through video. And auditory learners will be able to play specific directives over and over again and take notes.

No matter which way you decide to follow up with your employees once they have access to a quickie training video (less than 10 minutes is ideal), it's much easier to track your success with training. Make your key results from training videos the three Ms: Memorable (goofy and funny are the best!), Meaningful (relatable to the customers they know, but easy to adapt to new ones), and Measurable (super simple follow up).



Boss, Coach, Parent Figure? Yup!

Coaching on particular challenges as a group is also important when it comes to training. Though I am not a fan of role playing during a team meeting approach because I don't believe it brings out the best in individual learning styles and, frankly, it just makes even extroverts feel put on the spot, I do believe in the crowdsourcing approach to problem solving.

When a team is trying to achieve something, there are always unanticipated obstacles. Everyone must move into problem solving mode quickly and everyone must be on board. Why not throw the issue out via a quick video and get immediate input from the entire team on a problem? Responding via group chat can ensure that everyone feels comfortable opening up about answers and options where they may not be in person. In-the-moment feedback keeps everyone connected and engaged. Everyone can see each other's impact on key results and provide constructive reactions. Employees both new and experienced need recognition for their contributions. Likewise, as a leader, you can see if everyone is aligned to "take the hill" or have each other's back.

Using these FAST videos can help you develop a stronger team culture and get better at applying personal accountability to every situation. It empowers people at all levels of an organization to mentor one another on what matters most for that day, week, month or season. And if you're paying attention, it will teach you on the go how to be the best type of leader for your organization. 🌱

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